

THE
LAST CHANCE
DETECTIVES™

QUEST FOR THE
KING'S CROWN

ROBERT VERNON





QUEST FOR THE KING'S CROWN



ROBERT VERNON

FOCUS
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A Focus on the Family Resource
Published by Tyndale House Publishers

THE LAST CHANCE DETECTIVES

Canyon Quest

Mystery Lights of Navajo Mesa

Legend of the Desert Bigfoot

Escape from Fire Lake

Terror from Outer Space

Revenge of the Phantom Hot Rod

Quest for the King's Crown

The Last Chance Detectives: Quest for the King's Crown

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Cover design by Mike Harrigan

For manufacturing information regarding this product, please call 1-855-277-9400.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 978-1-64607-049-7

ISBN 978-1-68428-384-2 (ePub); ISBN 978-1-68428-385-9 (Kindle); ISBN 978-1-68428-383-5 (Apple)

Build: 2022-10-14 11:25:15 EPUB 3.0

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Prologue

*Near the present-day United States–Mexico
border—1540*

IN THE ORANGE HUES OF A LATE AFTERNOON SUNSET, a distant rider spurred his horse into a full gallop, driving it forward like a madman across the treacherous desert plain. The man's clothes were those of a Spanish conquistador. He wore a heavy steel breastplate, arm and leg greaves, and a metal skirt. On his head was a steel helmet with a pronounced crest on top and sweeping sides that came to points on either end.

The horse beneath him was lathered and nearing exhaustion, but the conquistador couldn't afford to show any mercy and continued to urge the animal on. A band of Apache warriors were hot on his trail, and he wasn't sure if they wanted the priceless cargo he had sworn to protect or were simply after his horse.

The native inhabitants of North and South America had never seen a horse before the conquistadors arrived. The idea that a man could ride an animal had not occurred to them before, but once they saw the speed and power of a horse—and what a man could do on one—they decided they must have them as well.

The Spaniard looked ahead and saw that he was approaching a row of craggy, red sandstone buttes. The biggest butte had a silhouette that resembled a saddle. Perhaps here he could find a place to hide and rest his horse before he ran it to death. But he was wary and fighting the urge to panic. He had seen firsthand the kind of torturous rituals the Apache inflicted upon their enemies and had no desire to fall into their hands.

The conquistador had no idea how the Apache were able to track his movements or keep up with the speed of his

horse. Perhaps it was their sheer numbers and use of smoke signals that made it seem like they were always one step ahead of him.

The conquistador's horse was beginning to stumble as it used up what was left of its waning stamina. Without slowing, the Spaniard pushed through some thick desert brush. A covey of high desert quail exploded from the brush, momentarily startling both horse and rider. Just as the conquistador started to relax, he spotted a rope stretched tight across the trail a few yards ahead. He immediately pulled on the reins, but his horse was moving too fast and in its exhaustive state never saw the waiting trap.

His mount hit the line hard. Immediately the horse pitched forward and its haunches somersaulted into the air. The rider was thrown free, but his faithful steed was not so lucky. As the dust began to settle, the poor horse lay gasping and braying in pain from what appeared to be a broken neck. As the Spaniard rushed to its side, he was immediately met with the angry buzz of incoming arrows. He tried to run but found that he was entangled in the reins of his horse. Pulling a knife from the scabbard at his side, he began cutting the leather lines when he felt a stinging stab in his side.

Freed at last from the tangled reins, the wounded Spaniard stumbled forward over the crest of a hill and slid down to the canyon below. At the bottom of the ravine, he found a river that looked to be about ten feet wide flowing over the sandstone rocks. He splashed into the water but had little time to enjoy its cool refreshment. He lifted his arm to examine the source of his pain and discovered that the shaft of an arrow was protruding from just below his armpit. Without thinking, he broke off the shaft of the arrow and immediately regretted it. The action caused a deep stabbing pain in his chest. He involuntarily coughed and tasted his own blood. He was no doctor but knew enough about medicine to realize that one or both of his lungs had been pierced.

He also knew the Apache would be coming over the ridge at any moment. Perhaps they already realized that the horse they sought was dying and worthless to them. They would

soon turn their attention to him—to see what they could salvage off of his person.

The injured conquistador looked around frantically for a place to hide. The Apache were excellent trackers, and he had made their job too easy. Not only had he left a clear path of footprints in his haste, but his wound had probably left a telltale trail of blood leading to his current position.

Though it took a lot of effort, the Spaniard waded his way against the current of the twisting river. He was hard to track as long as he remained in the water, but his energy was fading as fast as the wound in his side was bleeding out. He needed to find shelter soon, before he passed out. Rounding a boulder, he found a large pool of water. On the far side, a ten-foot-wide waterfall cascaded into the pool.

Though the waterfall was only four feet high, it gave the fugitive conquistador an idea. He made his way to the base of the waterfall and thrust his arm through the sheet of falling water. On the other side he found exactly what he was looking for: a small, shallow cavern behind the falls with an air pocket. The conquistador took a deep, labored breath and disappeared under the falls. On the other side, he found a three-foot-deep shelf. He raised himself onto the ledge and stretched out perpendicular to the waterfall. The pocket was wet and had small growing flora, but it offered plenty of fresh air and would hide his presence.

The conquistador realized that the tattered reins were the only thing still trailing out of the falls. They would be an instant giveaway that someone was hiding behind the watery cascade! He quickly pulled the reins back behind the falls and secured them beside him in the small air pocket.

He momentarily closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on slowing his breathing. He didn't want to take any chances that something as small as the noise of a cough would give away his hiding place.

About ten long minutes went by before he saw anything. Through the veil of water, he could barely make out the distorted shapes of several Apache warriors searching for him only a few yards away. He held his breath, fearful that at any

minute a hand might reach through the falls and discover him. But apparently his hiding place worked, as the figures eventually moved on and he could no longer make out any movement beyond the watery veil.

Only after fifteen more minutes passed—and he was sure they were gone—did the conquistador finally allow himself to relax.

His concern turned to the amount of blood he had lost. If the wound was as bad as he feared, he could bleed out within the hour. But maybe, just maybe, the bleeding wasn't as bad as he thought, and he could wrap the wound and find someone to help him. But that would have to wait, at least for the moment. He was tired and starting to feel a bit nauseated. He decided to stay where he was until his strength returned and he could move on.

As the conquistador closed his eyes, the world began to spin, the sound of the water grew faint, and he let out a long, weary exhale of breath. It was his last.

Chapter 1

Ambrosia, Arizona—1995

THE SMALL DESERT TOWN OF AMBROSIA boasted a wide array of roadside attractions and curiosities to lure in the road-weary traveler. One such example was a series of huge footprints embedded in the sidewalk in front of the town courthouse. Obviously made when the cement was still wet, the tracks were so big that visitors wondered if a dinosaur had left them.

In reality, the prints were the last remaining evidence of the Great Elephant Stampede of 1956.

On that fateful day, several elephants from a traveling circus became overheated in their stalled train cars and broke free—wildly following their noses to water. The pachyderms stampeded through the heart of the downtown square, crashing through the central band gazebo and trampling the courthouse's freshly poured sidewalk. The herd finally came to a stop at Floyd Needham's refreshment stand: Big Chief Burgers on Sixth Street. Not to be outdone by the other "biggest ever" attractions around town, Floyd had installed the "World's Largest Snow Cone" on top of his burger stand. Every day he dutifully climbed a ladder and filled the eight-gallon basin with real crushed ice and an assortment of colored sugar water.

When Floyd saw the elephants charging at his stand that day, he thought for sure they were after his roasted peanuts and immediately surrendered them. But the elephants had their hearts set on the huge snow cone on the roof and busted down the walls until they finally had their prize in their trunks. The giant snow cone happened to be grape flavored that day, which inspired Floyd to later rename the flavor Pachyderm Purple in memory of the event.



Nearly forty years later, Pachyderm Purple happened to be Ben Jones's favorite flavor. He paid for his extra-large snow cone and was careful not to spill it as he climbed aboard his bike. Steering with one hand and holding the dripping snow cone in the other, Ben pedaled as fast as his stout legs would allow down old Route 66.

The Last Chance Detectives met every Saturday morning at nine o'clock sharp, and Ben was running a few minutes late. He avoided a motor home pulling into the Last Chance Gas and Diner and pulled his bike up to the World War II-era B-17 bomber, the *Lady Liberty*, which was parked on the far side of the property. Ben let his bike fall to the ground and quickly entered the side door of the plane that served as the official headquarters of the Last Chance Detectives. He found Mike Fowler, Wynona Whitefeather, and Spencer Martin already waiting for him at the card table they always met around.

"Hey! You better have brought enough snow cones for the rest of us," Mike Fowler said.

"Sorry, Mike." Ben climbed into his usual spot in a hammock overlooking the card table. "There's no way I could've balanced four snow cones on my bike at the same time."

"As I was saying . . ." Spence interrupted and handed Mike an ordinary-looking sneaker. "I finished working on that secret shoe device I promised."

Spence was always coming up with new inventions—each more ingenious than the last.

"So, now you're working on an invention for Mike's shoes?" Ben complained. "When are you finally going to get around to fixing my Gloobers video game cartridge?"

"Probably next week," Spence assured him.

"That's what you said last time after you finished working on Mike's watch."

"If it wasn't for Spence coming up with that two-way radio wristwatch, we might have never solved the space shuttle

mystery,” Winnie reminded Ben.

“Speaking of mysteries,” Mike said, “I’m calling this meeting to order.”

Mike was the leader of the Last Chance Detectives. He started the club as a way to hone his detective skills so that he might one day solve the mystery of his missing father—an Air Force fighter pilot who mysteriously disappeared while on a mission in the Middle East.

Mike turned to Winnie. “Have we got any new cases lined up?”

“Honestly?” Winnie scanned her notepad and shrugged her shoulders. “Not much. We’ve got the usual missing pets. A stolen lawnmower . . .”

“Boring,” Ben said under his breath.

“Let’s see . . .” Winnie continued. “Del Hansen claims someone is dropping nails and metal screws on the highways outside of town so that people have to stop here to have their tires fixed.”

“Who would do something like that?” Spence asked.

“I don’t know,” Winnie admitted. “That’s why it’s a mystery.”

“Aw, nothing good ever happens around here,” Ben complained.

“Are you kidding me, Ben?” Mike asked incredulously. “We’ve been running this detective agency for only a little over a year and just think of all the cases we’ve solved. Like the UFO lights that turned out to be an international art smuggling ring. Or when we cracked the case of the desert Bigfoot!”

“Remember when we caught those bank robbers?” Winnie asked.

“How could I forget? They abandoned me out in the middle of the Fire Lake Wilderness Area,” Mike said.

“That’s right!” Ben exclaimed. “You got so hungry you ate a lizard!”

“How about the time we stopped international terrorists from stealing government secrets and saved the crew of the space shuttle,” Spence said. “We made the front page of

newspapers all over the world with that one.”

“And just a few weeks ago we solved the mystery of that phantom hot rod and helped rescue Sheriff Smitty from a burning building,” Mike reminded them. “We weren’t even sure you would survive that case, Ben.”

“I guess a lot of pretty epic stuff *has* happened,” Ben admitted.

“Sure!” Mike said. “Just give it a day or two and something big is bound to pop up. It always does.”

“What do you guys think we should do until then?” Winnie asked.

It was quiet for a moment as everyone thought it over.

Mike finally spoke up. “I say we take a day off!”

“Take a day off?” Winnie asked as everyone rolled the idea around. “What do you mean, exactly?”

“You know, do all the fun stuff we’ve been wanting to do but were too busy,” Mike explained.

Once again everyone agreed what a fine idea that was. But then the room grew uncomfortably quiet.

“So, what is all the fun stuff we’ve been wanting to do?” Ben wondered aloud.

“We could go to the library,” Spence suggested.

Ben rolled his eyes. “He said ‘fun,’ Spence. ‘Fun!’”

“How about the movies?” Winnie asked.

“Nothing good’s playing,” Ben stated matter-of-factly.

“How about that giant crocodile movie?”

Ben shook his head. “Already seen it and the crocodile looks fake.”

“Well . . .” Mike thought hard for a moment. “How about those wagon wheel tracks that we heard are still out in the desert? We’ve been wanting to see if those are real, haven’t we?”

“That’s right!” Ben agreed. “We could also check out that UFO landing site Harley Fisher claims is in the same general area.”

“It’s going to be quite hot,” Spence pointed out. “The weather report says the high is supposed to reach over 100 degrees today.”

“My brother spends a lot of time out that way and says there’s a small river that runs through there. We could cool off in it,” Winnie suggested.

“It’s settled, then,” Mike said. “Everyone, get your swimsuits! I’ll gas up the quad runners, and we’ll meet back here in an hour.”

Chapter 2

AN HOUR LATER the four friends met up and headed out into the desert west of town, to an area near Saddleback Butte.

Harley Fisher's "UFO landing site" was a bit underwhelming. It turned out to be a large circle of rocks that were darker than any other rocks in the area. Harley, who everyone considered a little crazy anyway, claimed the only explanation was that a UFO scorched the ground and rocks in that pattern when it landed and took back off. But the kids surmised that the burn marks were more likely created by a miner's cabin burning down sometime in the past.

The wagon wheel tracks, however, turned out to be pretty cool. Parallel grooves that were each two inches wide were clearly visible on the flat sandstone rock. The ruts were about a half-inch deep and ran for nearly fifteen yards. Spence's father, a geologist, had speculated that the grooves in the rock were made in the 1800s by wagon trains heading west. They all took the same path and would literally follow the same grooves in the rock, making them grow deeper and deeper over time. The four kids were pretty impressed that they could actually touch Old West history. Winnie took a picture of Ben lying across the tracks like he had been run over by a stagecoach.

By the time they decided to move on, they were all pretty hot and ready for a dip in the river Winnie's brother told her about. Winnie's Navajo family knew the desert surrounding Ambrosia like the backs of their hands, so if they said a river was in the area, you could be confident it was true.

The four kids drove the quad runners back the way they had come, and after a quarter of a mile, they turned off on a path in the shadow of Saddleback Butte. After driving up and over a crest, they discovered a small river running over

smooth red sandstone rock shelves.

A river in the arid desert is quite rare. This one flowed from an artesian spring that funneled the runoff from the not-so-distant Superstition Mountains. The water ran clear and cool. Its natural color was bright turquoise blue caused by minerals it had passed over in deep underground caverns.

The kids walked along the river until they found a pool that they all agreed would make a good swimming hole. It featured a ten-foot-wide waterfall that dropped about four feet into a deep oval pool. A tall boulder off to one side made for an ideal diving rock.

Mike and Ben wasted no time stripping off their shirts and shoes. While Winnie and Spence looked on, Mike waded into the water and Ben climbed the boulder.

“Let me make sure it’s deep enough before you jump in!” Mike called.

Mike disappeared under the water for about ten seconds before finally reappearing. “It’s at least nine feet deep. But I still wouldn’t dive in headfirst.”

Standing on the boulder, dressed in a pair of brightly colored G.I. Joe swim trunks, Ben studied the water below.

“Aren’t you kinda old for that swimsuit?” Winnie called up to him.

Ben was slightly embarrassed. He had gotten the trunks several years earlier, but they had been way too big at the time. They were now a little tight on him, and though they looked a bit “babyish,” he still liked to wear them. He decided to just embrace their goofiness. He flexed like a bodybuilder and danced as he sang:

“Flying deftly through the air, danger ’round him everywhere! Going where few will ever dare, G.I. Joe is always *theeeeere!*”

Tucking his knees up into his chest, Ben executed a perfect cannonball into the swimming hole. He hit the surface with a thunderous splash. Water flew high into the air and rained down on Winnie and Spence.

As the water dripped down across Spence’s dark features, he held up eight fingers. “This judge gives you a three for

degree of difficulty and a five for execution!”

Winnie held up nine fingers. “I’m going with a four for choreography and a five for sheer splash-age!”

“Aren’t you guys coming in?” Mike yelled up to Winnie and Spence.

“No thanks!” Spence replied. “You guys know how I feel about water. Besides, I’m still dealing with flashbacks after nearly drowning in that test chamber at the old military base. Thank goodness you guys rescued me in time.”

“I understand,” Mike said as he treaded water next to Ben. “How about you, Winnie?”

“I might dip my toes in,” Winnie replied. “But my brother says this river is teeming with snakes.”

“Seriously?” Ben looked around in the water.

“Aw, she’s just teasin’, Ben,” Mike assured him.

“Suit yourselves,” said Winnie, coolly brushing her fingers through her long dark hair.

“Too bad, Winnie! We’re not falling for your dopey . . .” Ben’s voice trailed off and his face momentarily froze. He looked down into the water and suddenly started flailing around in a panic. “Snake! I felt it!”

“Are you serious?” Mike asked. “Swear you’re telling the truth!”

“I swear! I swear!” Ben screamed. “There it is again! Aiyeeeeeee!”

“Hold on a second!” Mike reached under the water near Ben. “I’ve got it, and it’s not a snake.”

“What is it then?” asked Ben, still clearly rattled.

Mike lifted what looked like a braided brown rope out of the water. “Here’s your snake. Nothing but an old rope. See for yourself.”

Ben took the rope out of Mike’s hands and studied it. “Oh man! In the water, it felt just like a live snake!”

“Boy, did you scream,” Winnie teased.

“I didn’t scream . . . exactly.” Ben pulled on the rope and the line went taut, lifting above the water. It seemed to be connected to something behind the waterfall. “I wonder what it’s tied to,” he said.

“You sure *did* scream,” Winnie reminded him. “Kinda sounded like a girl.”

“I did not!” Ben began following the rope toward the waterfall. “I didn’t scream, did I, Spence?”

They all knew Spence didn’t want to be pulled into the argument, but he also couldn’t tell a lie. “Well, you did yell pretty loud.”

“Hear that, Winnie? I *yelled*.” Ben was now at the base of the waterfall and put his weight into it as he tugged hard on the line. “I definitely didn’t screa—”

Suddenly something gave way behind the waterfall. The waters parted and out leaned the head and shoulders of a decaying skeleton. Barely held together by weathered tendons, the jaws gaped open mere inches from Ben’s terrified face.

Staring deep into the skull’s empty eye sockets, Ben became aware that someone was definitely screaming. It took a few more moments to realize that the voice he heard was his own.

Chapter 3

SHERIFF THEODORE SMITTY was born and raised in Ambrosia. He was an underachiever in high school and earned a reputation as a bit of a troublemaker. Back then he liked to race cars, taking on all challengers. This earned Smitty not only a notorious collection of speeding tickets but also a night in jail for a crash that almost toppled Ambrosia's one and only water tower. Smitty eventually got straightened out, but the water tower never did. It leaned slightly to one side from that day forward.

Researchers have suggested that criminals and police officers have many similar personality traits. The main difference is that police officers have learned the art of self-control—something Smitty picked up after serving in Vietnam with the United States Army Rangers.

When Smitty returned home to Ambrosia, he was a new man: one with a new outlook, maturity, and self-discipline. For the last twenty years, he'd dutifully worn the peacemaker's star and carried the responsibility of being Ambrosia's chief lawman. This meant he had to be on call twenty-four hours a day. And because things tended to go wrong all at once, the job could get pretty stressful.

In truth, Smitty did have a few deputies to help him out from time to time. But they were all considered "reserves" because Ambrosia's city budget couldn't afford to keep them on the regular payroll.

Smitty had just one full-time employee. Arlene Bell carried the dual responsibility of office receptionist and 911 operator. She also kept an organized file system and spell-checked the police reports, since neither was Smitty's strong suit. She liked to think of herself as Smitty's "Girl Friday," but she wasn't really involved in any crime-solving or law enforcement. Her

workload was often fairly light, which meant she spent much of her time on the job reading romance novels and spreading local gossip via the office switchboard.

The sheriff's office, a small single-story brick structure with a glass front, sat on a bluff overlooking the town. Arlene sat behind the front counter, transfixed by the latest plot twist of *Destiny's Reluctant Kiss*, when the office door suddenly burst open and Ben Jones raced in.

"Arlene! Call Smitty! We need him right now!" Ben yelled.

"Ben Jones! You always startle me crashing in here like that!" Arlene spoke with a bit of a lisp, which got more pronounced when she was excited. "You almost gave me a heart attack!"

"But this is an emergency!" he exclaimed. "Where's Smitty?"

"A septic truck collided with an asphalt rig that was repaving part of the highway on old 66. He's been gone all day."

"You gotta call him!" Ben insisted.

Mike, Winnie, and Spence entered the office, looking just as excited and almost as breathless as Ben.

Arlene looked at them skeptically. "This better not be another one of you kids' wild stories."

"It's not," Mike assured her.

"It was awful!" Winnie was almost in tears.

"It attacked me!" Ben added.

"I wouldn't say it 'attacked' you," Spence clarified.

"Practically!" Ben said.

"Wait! One at a time." Arlene put down her book and got out a notepad. "One person, please, calmly explain what happened."

"Okay!" Ben's eyes grew big and his voice dramatically lowered as he began his epic tale. "There was this creepy, horrible, spooky—"

"Not you," Arlene interrupted. She had heard enough of Ben's wild tales. "Mike, you tell it."

"We were out near Saddleback Butte," Mike began. "We went swimming in a river and there was this waterfall—"

"*Haunted* waterfall!" Ben interrupted.

"Haunted?" Arlene was looking doubtful again.

"Anyways," Mike continued, "Ben thought he felt a snake, but it turned out to only be a rope."

"Obviously." Arlene set down the notebook and began filing her fingernails.

"So, Ben pulled the rope, and when he did—well, out came a . . ." Mike paused, probably realizing how crazy it was going to sound.

"Yes?" Arlene waited.

"Go ahead and tell her!" Ben urged.

"Well, it was a . . ."

"A skeleton!" Winnie finished the sentence for him.

"A *screaming* skeleton!" Ben added.

"The skeleton didn't scream," Winnie said. "*You* screamed."

"I did not! I only *yelled* when it attacked me. Right, Spence?"

"Screamed. Yelled." Spence shrugged. "We're simply talking semantics—in which case, 'attacked' is probably not the most accurate description of what happened either."

"But you saw it! It leaped right out at me!" Ben said.

"And that's when Ben screamed," Winnie added.

"I didn't scream!"

"You sure did." Winnie crossed her arms.

"Everyone calm down, please!" Arlene's lisp was back. "Just tell me what happened after the skeleton screamed . . . I mean attacked . . . or whatever it did."

"Ben let go of the rope, and the skeleton . . ." Mike paused. "Well, it just disappeared back into the waterfall."

The room became quiet as Arlene studied the kids' faces to determine if they were pulling some kind of joke.

"Honest, Arlene!" Winnie said.

Arlene shook her head, not knowing what to do with them or their story. "Of course, you all realize that Smitty is never going to believe any of this."

"Never going to believe any of what?" Smitty stood behind the group, having just entered the station. He groaned

quietly as he hung his sweat-stained cowboy hat on a hook. He looked tired and worn, and he smelled of asphalt and raw sewage. Even his Wyatt Earp-style mustache was sagging. It was clear that he was definitely not in a mood to be trifled with.

“Are you kids sticking with your story?” Arlene asked. All four nodded in the affirmative.

“What story?” Smitty asked as he pulled a container of Tums from its hiding place in a nearby file cabinet.

“You’d better fasten your spurs for this one,” Arlene warned.

“Let’s hear it.” Smitty popped a couple of the heartburn-soothing tablets into his mouth and grimaced as he chewed.

“Well, according to the kids . . .” Arlene paused and gave them a stern look. “And it better be the truth!”

“It is,” Ben said weakly, somewhat intimidated by Smitty’s sour disposition.

“The kids claim—and these are *their* words—that they were at a haunted swimming hole out near Saddleback Butte when a skeleton came out of a waterfall and either attacked or screamed at Ben.”

The story was out there now. There was no taking it back.

Smitty’s eyes narrowed as he chewed the chalky substance and studied each of the kids’ faces. The room was quiet except for the sound of the clock ticking above the front counter. To Arlene, it sounded like the ticking of a time bomb, and she guessed that Smitty was about to explode.

“Mike, is that really what happened?” Smitty finally asked.

“Well, I don’t know about the place being haunted or that the skeleton actually screamed or attacked anybody . . . but yes, sir, that’s pretty much it.”

Smitty shrugged and wearily placed his cowboy hat back on his head. “Then I guess we’d better go see what this is all about.”

Arlene couldn’t believe her ears.

Chapter 4

WITH THE KIDS LEADING THE WAY on their quad runners, Smitty followed behind in his patrol truck. Sitting beside him, Mike's grandfather studied the horizon.

"Saddleback Butte," said Pop Fowler, looking at the large formation that resembled a saddle. "I haven't been out here in years."

"Thanks for agreeing to come along," Smitty said. "If the kids are right—and there is some kind of corpse out here—then I'm gonna need some help retrieving it."

"No problem. But I am kinda curious about one thing."

"What's that?"

"Well, to put it bluntly, you have a history of not believing a lot of the kids' wild stories. What convinced you this time?" Pop asked.

"Remember when I got a whiff of those 'fear compound' chemicals and started having hallucinations? I thought we were being invaded by the Vietcong!"

"How could I forget? That case was only a couple months ago."

"Well, I'm pretty sure there wasn't a soul in town who believed my story. And I don't blame them. But I gotta tell you, it was a pretty lonely feeling." Smitty pointed to the kids ahead on their quads. "Your grandson and his friends were the only ones who believed in me enough to at least check out my story."

"I see," Pop said.

"Besides that, I've got to admit that in the past year or so they've solved some pretty big mysteries around these parts."

"I'll say! Did you know they got a thank-you letter from the president himself for the part they played in the space shuttle case?"

“No kidding,” Smitty said. “You know, Mike’s turning out to be a lot like his dad.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty proud of both Mike *and* John.”

Smitty gestured at the desert landscape. “If I remember right, John made a pretty important archaeological discovery not too far from here.”

“Yeah, he and his buddy Harrison Lasiloo discovered those Anasazi ruins. They were only teenagers at the time. Ended up being a pretty big deal in the archaeological world. Their discovery was even written up in some periodicals.”

“Why didn’t John continue on that path? Seems like he had a real knack for archaeology.”

“He lost interest in it after Harry’s accident.”

“Yeah, we all heard about that.” Smitty paused momentarily. “If you don’t mind me asking, was there any truth to the rumor? You know, about the cave-in.”

“You mean, that it was caused by some kind of gremlin?”

Smitty chuckled. “‘Leprechaun’ was the way I heard it.”

“‘Chaneque.’ ‘Popo-li.’ ‘Nunnupi.’ American Indian tribes use all sorts of names to describe the same legendary race of small, troublemaking people. It makes for a good story, but the real-life explanation is usually not near as exciting.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Smitty said.

“I was there when they pulled Harry out of the rubble, and I didn’t see any gremlins. I think the rumor got started because Harry kept mumbling something about a very small man. He was also delirious and not making a lot of sense. We easily could’ve misunderstood him.”

Pop pointed to the kids ahead. “Looks like they’re pulling off onto a small trail. I guess this is the spot.”

Smitty leaned his head out the window. “What’s up, Mike?”

“This is as far as the truck can go!” Mike called back.

“We’re going to have to hoof it in from here!”

Smitty and Pop grabbed a couple of large bags out of the truck and proceeded to follow the kids down the ravine to the river.

Arriving at the pool, Smitty dropped his bags and

surveyed the surroundings.

"Is that the waterfall?"

"That's it," Ben said. "Careful, Sheriff. He's hiding back in there somewhere!"

Smitty took off his hat, boots, and gun belt and stepped into some waterproof hip waders. Pop and the kids watched as he gingerly stepped into the pool.

"Shouldn't you take your gun?" Ben asked.

"No."

"Then maybe one of us should cover you in case—"

"No! No matter what happens, no one touches my gun! Is that understood?"

The kids all nodded.

"Don't worry, Smitty," Pop assured him. "I'll make sure no one goes anywhere near it."

Smitty looked down, trying to make out the bottom of the pool. "Do you kids know how deep this gets?"

"It's probably about nine feet deep in the middle," Mike replied.

Smitty sighed as he waded deeper into the pool. "Did you say there was a rope or something I need to pull?"

"Yeah," Mike said. "It should be right in front of the waterfall. Dead center."

"Guess there's no way of doing this without getting completely wet." The water spilled over the top of Smitty's waders and down his front. "Just not my day."

Now thoroughly soaked, Smitty began feeling around underwater for the rope. "Wait a minute. . . . Yep, I've got it."

"Careful now!" Ben warned.

"Just pull on it?" Smitty asked.

"Give it a good hard tug," Spence said.

Smitty hesitated for a moment. "What does this thing look like again?"

"Kinda like one of those skeletons on that pirate ride at Disneyland," Winnie said.

"Only it jumps out at you!" Ben added.

Smitty didn't want to admit it, but he did feel a little nervous. He grabbed the rope firmly and gave it a tug.

Nothing happened.

"Maybe put your weight into it," Pop suggested.

Smitty got a good grip on the rope and tugged with all his might. Everyone held their breath.

Snap!

The old rope broke and Smitty fell backward into the water.

"Are you okay?" Winnie called.

"Yeah, doggone rope broke off behind the falls," Smitty said.

"Now what are you gonna do?" Ben asked.

Smitty thought about it for a second. "I guess I gotta go in there."

"You sure that's a good idea?" Pop asked.

"Nope. But I can't think of a better one." Smitty took a deep breath and disappeared into the water.



Winnie spoke for all of them: "That is one brave man."

Through the veil of water, they could just make out Smitty's silhouette on the other side of the waterfall. He seemed to remain motionless for a while before leaning in deeper and disappearing from sight. The seconds turned to minutes.

"I hope he's okay," Winnie said.

"What if the skeleton got him?" Ben wondered.

"Smitty can take care of himself," Pop assured them.

Another minute went by before Smitty reappeared. His face was ashen and somewhat sad.

"Well?" Mike asked.

"It's a DB all right."

"DB?" Ben asked.

"It's an official abbreviation for police reports," Spence explained. "In law enforcement language, a DB means a 'dead body.'"

"There's a natural air pocket behind the falls," Smitty explained as he made his way to the shallow side of the pool. "The body's tucked in there on a ledge along with what looks

to be the leather reins of a horse. And by the look of things, he's been there a very long time."

"What makes you say that?" Pop asked.

"He's wearing some sort of metal breastplate." Smitty tilted his head sideways and tried to shake the water out of one ear. "My guess is that when Ben pulled him out from behind the waterfall, that heavy breastplate—and gravity—sorta pulled him back in."

"Breastplate?" Mike wondered aloud. "Shouldn't we call a museum or something?"

"Good question," Pop said. "What's the protocol for something like this?"

"Normally, on dry ground, I'd leave things the way we found them," Smitty said.

"What makes this different?" Winnie asked.

"This involves water . . ." Smitty rubbed his chin as though he was still trying to work it out in his own mind. "And we've already disturbed the site—changed the position of the body. I'm afraid some artifacts might wash away now, so I reckon we gotta do our best to pack him out ourselves. And we need to do it now. I'm going to my truck to call it in, then I'll be back so we can get to work."

"Better hurry," Pop said. "We're running out of light."

"Don't I know it." Smitty started trudging up the slope to his pickup. "This is sure turning out to be one of those days."



Roger Huntley was the editor, lead reporter, and photographer for the local paper, *The Ambrosia Signal*. Though he was in his early thirties, he idolized the image of 1940s-era big-city journalists and tried to emulate their style and dress. Thick-framed glasses. White dress shirts with rolled-up sleeves. Suspenders. Pipe. He even wore a fedora with a press pass tucked into the hatband.

Opinions of his reporting were mixed, but everyone in town agreed on one thing: The young journalist took himself way too seriously. Rumor was that he had changed his name to Roger Huntley because he thought it had a nicer ring than

his given name, Brandon Kuchenski.

Roger sent a box of chocolates to Arlene Bell once a month and a flower bouquet every holiday. In return, Arlene passed on any hot scoops she thought were newsworthy. In this case, the discovery of an ancient corpse was a stronger lead story than the closure of a car dealership, so Roger grabbed his camera equipment, climbed aboard his trusty Vespa scooter, and headed out into the desert.

Smitty, Pop, and the kids were carrying the tarp-covered human remains out of the canyon on a stretcher when Roger arrived—camera slung over his shoulder, pen and notepad in hand.

“Sheriff Smitty! Sheriff Smitty!” Roger called out as he approached.

“As if this day weren’t bad enough,” Smitty muttered.

“What can you tell me about your murder investigation?” Roger asked, now walking beside the stretcher.

“Murder investigation? Who said anything about a *murder* investigation? Besides, who tipped you off to this?”

“I can’t reveal my sources.”

“I bet it was Arlene.”

Roger quickly asked his next question. “What makes you think the remains could belong to D. B. Cooper?”

“*D. B. Cooper?*” Smitty exclaimed.

“Yes. Are you saying that you don’t know who he is?”

“Of course I know who D. B. Cooper is—or was. He hijacked a plane, parachuted out, and disappeared with \$200,000 in ransom money. But that was in the Pacific Northwest nearly twenty-five years ago!”

“So you deny that this is D. B. Cooper?”

“Where would you ever get the idea? I bet it was Arlene!”

“I can’t reveal my sources,” Roger repeated.

“She probably heard you use the term ‘DB’ for dead body,” Winnie suggested as they neared the back of Smitty’s patrol truck.

“Why are the Last Chance Detectives here?” Roger moved on to a new line of questioning. “Did they have something to do with it?”

“We found the skeleton!” Ben said proudly.

“A skeleton?” Roger pulled the camera off his shoulder. “May I get a picture, Smitty?”

“You know better than to ask that.” Smitty was now nearing the truck and nudged Roger out of the way with his elbow. “Until we know a little more of just who this is, there will be no pictures of the remains. You know, we wouldn’t want to traumatize D. B. Cooper’s family.”

Roger’s eyes lit up. “So you’re saying it *could* be D. B. Cooper?!”

Smitty looked at him dryly. “Trust me, Rog, I was being sarcastic.”

As Smitty and Pop lifted the remains into the back of the truck, the stretcher momentarily tilted and a small object slid out from under the tarp.

Roger immediately bent over and picked it up. “Looks like a key!”

The object was calcified and rusted from years in the wet environment, but it did indeed resemble a key hanging from a rotted leather strip.

“Give that here, Roger!” Smitty said.

“Hold on!” Roger started corralling the young detectives into a group. He handed Ben the key and pulled out his camera. “I need a picture for tomorrow’s front-page lead story!”

The kids smiled awkwardly as Ben held up the key. The flashbulb popped, capturing the moment for all posterity.

Chapter 5

THE LOCAL CORONER'S OFFICE had been closed for several weeks because, ironically, the previous coroner had died and Ambrosia's leaders had not yet hired a replacement.

The morning after they recovered the body, Smitty asked Carl "Doc" Benson, the town's physician, to come take a look at their find. After all, Doc was the closest thing to a coroner he could think of. Smitty also knew that the doctor was an avid rockhound and amateur archaeologist.

Doc Benson was somewhat disabled and walked stiffly with a cane. Despite his impairment, Doc spent most of his free time driving his Range Rover around the desert, exploring areas—such as the Anasazi cliff dwellings—that were known for ancient American Indian artifacts.

If the skeletal remains were as old as Smitty thought, he knew Doc Benson would want to have a look. Besides, Doc had a brilliant mind with knowledge spanning several different scientific disciplines. Early in his career, he had even helped develop prosthetic limbs for wounded soldiers. There was hardly a subject the doctor couldn't navigate. If anyone local could unravel the mystery of the bones, it was Doc Benson.

While the kids watched, Smitty and Pop carried the skeleton into the autopsy room of the coroner's office. They set the remains—still wearing the breastplate—on the metal examining table.

Dressed in a white lab coat, Doc silently examined the body and breastplate for nearly an hour before taking a look at the key they'd found. He delicately held it between latex-gloved fingers while peering at it through a large magnifying lamp. He finally lowered the key and shook his head in disbelief.

“Do you have any idea what you all have stumbled upon?”

“Well, that’s why we called you, Doc,” Pop said. “We really *don’t* know.”

Doc motioned toward the body lying on the autopsy table. “The breastplate is obviously that of a conquistador, which makes it well over 400 years old.”

“How can that be?” Spence asked. “The skeleton doesn’t appear nearly that old. There are still tendons holding it together, and even strands of hair on the skull.”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps there was some combination of minerals in that spot that preserved the body and the artifacts for all these years. The breastplate alone, in such a condition, is priceless!”

“Wow!” Ben exclaimed.

Doc held up the key as if he’d found the Holy Grail. “But this! *This!*”

“Is it a key?” Spence asked.

Doc nodded and his eyes widened. “Yes, but not just any key. Here on the handle—beneath the mineral deposits—I can make out an engraving.”

“Of what?” Winnie asked.

“Come closer and have a look.” Doc put the key back under the magnifying lamp and beckoned them over. “This key bears the unmistakable seal of the governor of New Galicia—*Francisco Vázquez de Coronado!*”

Ben looked a little confused. “You mean the guy who makes all that foreign beer?”

“C’mon, Ben!” Spence rolled his eyes. “Weren’t you paying attention when we studied him in school?”

“Apparently not,” Ben admitted.

“Then let me give you a quick refresher,” Spence began. “Coronado was a Spanish explorer who in 1540 led a large expedition through the Southwest in search of the legendary lost Seven Cities of Cíbola.”

“Very good, Spence.” Doc Benson looked impressed. “You really know your history.”

“None of us know it as well as you do, Doc,” Pop said. “If I recall correctly, you’re an expert on early southwestern

history.”

“Oh, I don’t know about being an expert; but I do enjoy reading about it whenever I have the time.” Doc Benson dropped the key into an airtight bag for safekeeping.

“So enlighten us, Doc,” Smitty said. “What’s this about lost cities?”

“Well, according to medieval legend, seven bishops fled Spain and Portugal during the Middle Ages after coming under intense religious persecution from the Muslim Moors. Once they landed in the New World, the bishops supposedly found streams flowing over with sparkling gold sand. Settling into their surroundings, they made friends with the natives and founded seven fabulously wealthy cities made out of pure gold!”

“Whole cities made out of gold?” Ben exclaimed.

“That’s what the legend says.” Doc Benson led the group back to the examination table with the skeletal remains.

“Now, here’s where actual history takes over. In 1539, Friar Marcos de Niza, an Italian missionary and explorer, claimed to have seen one of these cities from a distance before being run off by the natives. When he reported what he had found to Coronado, an expedition was formed. They brought extravagant gifts—jewels and treasures—that they hoped would foster peace and impress people who lived in golden cities. They blazed a trail through much of the Southern region of North America and were the first Europeans to view the Grand Canyon.

“They never found the mythical lost cities of gold, and Coronado gave up the expedition after he mysteriously lost several men in the rugged hills. According to legend, Coronado himself named the area the Superstition Mountains.”

“That’s not too far from here,” Mike said.

“No, it’s not,” Doc confirmed. “Coronado and de Niza barely made it back, but those carrying the goodwill gifts couldn’t move as fast. Apparently, that fabulously valuable treasure was hidden somewhere in the desert before the last of the explorers were finally wiped out.”

Winnie looked down at the decayed skeleton in awe. "So, are you suggesting that these remains might actually be one of Coronado's men?"

"Possibly." Doc could only shake his head in disbelief. "You kids might very well have found one of the doomed guardians of the treasure!"

"Wow!" Ben exclaimed.

"Excuse me, Doctor Benson." Mike leaned forward to get a better look at the skeleton.

"What's that, Mike?"

"Does it look like he's clenching something in his hand?"

"Let's take a closer look." Doc Benson focused his penlight on the gnarled fist. "Good eye, Mike! Looks to be some kind of paper or parchment."

"What could it be?" Winnie asked.

Doc Benson snapped off his penlight. "I want to know as badly as the rest of you, but we should probably leave the remains as they are until a specialist arrives."

"When will that be?" Ben asked.

"The mayor suggested we turn them over to the National Southwest Museum," Smitty said. "They usually handle American Indian remains and artifacts. But it can take them quite a while."

"That's for sure." Doc Benson shook his head in frustration. "I've already contacted them and tried to explain the importance of what I think we have, but they said it would be at least a couple of weeks before they could send someone out here."

Spence leaned in to examine the skeletal remains and winced at the sour smell. "It's starting to put off a slight odor. I wonder if the body will decompose faster now that it has been removed from the environment that was preserving it. There might not be much left if we wait for someone from the museum to show up."

"I'm afraid you might be right, Spence," Doc agreed.

"We can't let that happen, Doc!" Ben said.

Smitty took off his cowboy hat and scratched his head, deep in thought. "Can't we just freeze it?"

“We certainly can,” Doc said. “But the freezing and eventual thawing cycle would probably destroy whatever parchment he’s holding. It’s already well over 400 years old. I don’t think it would survive.”

The room was silent as everyone considered what to do next.

Mike was the first to speak. “I say we try to get a look at whatever parchment he’s holding now—before it rots away.”

“Yeah!” Ben agreed.

“I’m for it.” Pop shrugged. “But it’s your call, Smitty. What do you think?”

Smitty hesitated for a moment. “What’s your opinion, Doc? Do you think this is our best shot at seeing what that parchment is?”

Doc nodded. “I do.”

“Then I’m game. Let’s do this!”

Chapter 6

DOC BENSON STOOD OVER THE DETERIORATED REMAINS like he was about to perform open-heart surgery. He wore a white smock, blue surgical gloves, and a pair of magnifying glasses. A harness wrapped around his forehead held a surgical headlamp. On a cart beside him were various chemicals, surgical tools, a petri dish, and some sort of small glass chamber with an equally small compressor.

Smitty, Pop, and the kids watched quietly from behind so as not to disturb the delicate procedure. Doc Benson stretched his neck from side to side in order to limber up.

“Okay. I’m going to have to work fast. I’ll try to explain as I go.”

“No problem, Doc,” Smitty said. “You just do your thing and let us know if we can help in any way.”

“Right.” Doc held a pair of tweezers in his right hand and a small aerosol can in his left. “First we’re going to freeze the area with a liquid nitrogen spray.”

“I thought you said freezing would destroy it,” Winnie said.

“True. Freezing will indeed destroy it, but doing it this way will give us a small window of opportunity to see what we have here. Trust me.”

Doc worked quickly. He sprayed the contents of the aerosol onto the skeleton’s clenched fist. It immediately turned white as it froze. A cold blue mist rose into the air. Using the tweezers, he gently grabbed the parchment by the edge and slipped it out of the skeleton’s clenched hand. Everyone could now see that it was a small scroll about two-and-a-half inches wide. Doc set the parchment in a petri dish and slid it into the small glass chamber.

Once he had it safely inside the chamber, he added a few

drops of a chemical mixture and quickly closed the door. The compressor immediately went to work and Doc started the timer on his wristwatch.

“Thirty seconds! Spence, get ready to hand me that camera.”

“Standing by.” Holding a 35mm camera at the ready, Spence watched Doc in awe. “Wow! I’ve read about the hydrolysis process before, but I’ve never seen this form of vacuum freezing demonstrated firsthand.”

“It’s a little risky because you only get one shot at it.” Doc’s wristwatch beeped. “Time!”

Doc quickly removed the scroll from the chamber and set it on the table. Using his gloved fingertips, he easily unrolled the now-pliable scroll. The whole thing measured about eight inches by two-and-a-half inches. It featured diagrams and what appeared to be writing.

“Looks like a map!” Mike said.

Doc turned to Spence. “Quick! The camera!”

Working as fast as he could, Doc leaned over the table and took a quick succession of photos. Almost immediately the edges of the parchment began to shrivel. Cracks spread across the scroll. Within a matter of seconds, the parchment disintegrated into fragments until there was virtually nothing left but ash.

“It’s gone!” Winnie said.

“It was the only way to unroll the parchment. But now its message is forever preserved on film.” Doc carefully handed the camera to Spence. “Great care must be taken with this roll of film.”

“Absolutely, sir,” Spence assured him.

“I got only a brief look at the parchment, but it did appear to be a map. Combine that with the key . . .” Doc shook his head in disbelief and smiled. “If it’s what I think it is, then I believe we are on the cusp of unlocking the fabulous secrets of Coronado’s lost treasure once and for all!”

“Do you really think so?” Winnie asked.

“The way our luck’s been running,” Doc said, “I don’t see what could possibly stop us!”



A Greyhound bus rolled up to the Ambrosia bus terminal. With a loud hiss, the air brakes engaged, bringing the vehicle to a full stop.

A young woman and her small daughter struggled with their oversized luggage and waited to board. When the bus doors finally opened, the mother couldn't help but let out a small gasp.

Before her eyes stood an imposingly large man.

"Pardon us," said the woman, pulling her daughter out of his way.

The man's expression never changed. He made no reply, other than to stoop and turn sideways to fit through the door. He wasn't overweight, just extremely tall and wide.

He stood on the sidewalk, his slate gray eyes darting back and forth as he surveyed his new surroundings. He wore a long black coat that extended down to his black boots. His skin was tan, and his long, dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail. His neatly trimmed mustache stood out amid several days' worth of beard stubble.

The man set down his single piece of luggage, pulled a folded newspaper out of his pocket, and opened it up in his immense hands. It was a copy of *The Ambrosia Signal*. Under the front-page headline—"Local Kid Detectives Do It Again!"—was a picture of the Last Chance Detectives holding the outstretched key. Another photo, a close-up of the key, accompanied Roger Huntley's story.

Gazing at the photo, the man's grin revealed a set of crooked teeth and a single gold tooth. He stashed the newspaper back into his pocket, picked up his bag, and marched off as if on a mission.

Chapter 7

SPENCE AND MIKE HEADED OFF to start developing the film while Smitty, Doc Benson, and the others were wrapping things up at the coroner's office.

"Sheriff, I hereby entrust you with this ancient key," said Doc Benson as he handed the sealed bag to Smitty.

"And as you all are my witnesses, I'm securing it into one of the coroner's lockers," Smitty said. He opened a metal drawer that looked like a safety deposit box, placed the bag inside, slid the drawer shut, and locked it securely. "And here it will stay!"

"Until we decipher the map," Ben added.

"I'm afraid not," Smitty said reluctantly.

"Why not, Sheriff?" Ben asked.

"We've got to figure out who owns that key first."

"But the original owners died over 400 years ago," Winnie reminded the group. "Besides, we found it. Doesn't that make it ours?"

"Maybe. Maybe not," Smitty said. "With something this valuable, that's all gotta be sorted out by someone with more authority than I have."

"But if the pictures show that it is a treasure map," Ben said, "couldn't we just sort of borrow the key for a little while?"

Smitty shook his head. "Sorry, Ben. I want to know if there's hidden treasure out there just as badly as you do. But we've got to wait until everything's done properly."

"I hate to say it, but Smitty's right," Doc Benson admitted. "Besides that, having the key in your possession could put you in real danger. If certain characters find out that it exists, they might stop at nothing to get their hands on such a valuable treasure."

"That's why we need to keep this whole thing under wraps," Smitty warned. "The fewer people who know about the key the better!"

"Um . . . have you seen this morning's paper?" Winnie asked.

"No, why?"

"A picture of us and the key is kinda on the front page."

"Roger Huntley!" Smitty shook his head in frustration.

"Why did I let him take your picture? Now it's all over town!"

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Sheriff," Winnie said.

"None of us knew how important the key was at the time."

"Well, hopefully no one else will recognize that key for what it really is." Smitty pointed a stern finger at the group. "Everybody, promise me that you won't say a word about Coronado or the map, and definitely don't mention anything about a lost treasure. Understood?"

Everyone nodded in agreement. Ben made a motion like he was zipping his lips shut.

Smitty seemed satisfied. "Good. As long as we keep this information to ourselves, we should be safe."



Arlene Bell had the sheriff's office all to herself and was looking at a recently delivered box of complimentary chocolates. Her fingers playfully danced across the chocolates as she tried to decide whether she should indulge in a nut or a chew. She usually spent her lunch hour at the switchboard, chatting it up with her girlfriends from around town. Today was no different.

"Debi, you've got to promise me that you'll keep this to yourself . . . You will? Good!" Arlene stuffed a chocolate into her mouth. "Now, you didn't hear it from me, but that body they found? Well, it's just possible that it's none other than Jimmy Hoffa!"

The switchboard beeped, alerting her to an incoming call.

"Hold on, Deb! I've got to answer this." Arlene put her friend on hold and picked up the other line. "Ambrosia Sheriff's Office. This is Arlene."

“It’s Smitty, Arlene.”

“Yes, Sheriff?”

“I’m just leaving the coroner’s office, but listen, this whole situation is turning out to be a lot more ticklish than I first thought.”

“It is?” Arlene struggled to swallow her chocolate without Smitty noticing.

“Yes. Given the sensitive nature of what we’ve discovered, I want you to put a lid on giving out any information unless you ask me first.”

“Sheriff, you know you can always trust me to keep things completely confidential.”

“Yeah, well,” Smitty sounded serious, “just be careful and let me know if you spot any suspicious characters around town. Understand?”

“I will,” Arlene promised.

As soon as Smitty hung up, Arlene switched back to her original call.

“Debi! You’re never going to believe it, but it looks like this case has blown wide open! I can’t tell you much right now, but—”

The entry bell suddenly rang, alerting Arlene that someone had come in the front door of the sheriff’s office.

“Gotta run, Debs. I’ll call you back later. Bye!”

Arlene licked the chocolate off of her fingertips and went to the front counter. “Hello, may I help . . .”

No one was there.

Arlene looked at the bell above the door. It was still gently swaying as if it had been rung only moments ago. She walked over to the front window and peered out through the blinds. The parking lot appeared empty as well.

Arlene was a little spooked. She hoped it was only some kids pulling a silly prank. Nonetheless, Smitty had warned her to report anything suspicious. She wasn’t sure this qualified but decided she had better let Smitty know. She turned on her heel and—

Arlene ran face-first into the chest of a very large man who had been quietly standing behind her.

“Oh!” Arlene stumbled backward and looked up into the face of the man towering above her. She didn’t like what she saw. Her legs began to buckle, but she caught herself and tried to act nonchalant. “Gracious! You startled me!”

The man only stared at her.

Arlene quickly moved behind the counter, trying to put something between herself and the imposing stranger. She let out a forced, nervous laugh. “So, where did you come from?”

The man smiled, revealing a gold tooth, and simply pointed to the small restroom located off the foyer.

“I see, I see . . .” Arlene decided to hide her nervousness by looking busy. She picked up a letter opener and started going through the morning mail. “How may I help you, sir?”

The man walked up to the counter and finally spoke. His voice was deep and gravelly. “Habla español, señora?”

“What?”

“You . . . talk Spanish?” the man struggled to say.

“Oh, no. Took a couple semesters of French though. Maybe you should come back later.”

The man stared at her sternly.

“You know, come back when the sheriff is here.” Arlene nervously opened another letter. “I think he speaks a little Spanish. In fact, he should be here any minute! Not that you should wait around.”

The stranger suddenly reached into his pocket. Arlene dropped the letter opener, unsure if he was going for some sort of weapon.

The man pulled a newspaper out of his pocket and unfolded it on the counter. He picked up the letter opener Arlene had dropped and used it to point at the picture on the front page.

“You . . . know this . . .” he struggled to find the words, “uh . . . peoples?”

Arlene saw the letter opener was pointed at a picture of the four Last Chance Detectives holding a key. She could also see her face reflected in the letter opener’s blade and realized how scared she looked.

“I-I don’t know. Please . . . just come back later,” she

pleaded.

The man looked at her sourly.

Chapter 8

THE LADY LIBERTY WAS A BOEING B-17 FLYING FORTRESS that Pop Fowler had flown as a young airman in World War II. It now attracted visitors to the Last Chance Gas and Diner. Countless tourists had taken their pictures with the old warbird that was in pristine condition. Pop figured that since she had seen him safely through twenty-three combat missions, he ought to return the favor. He had lovingly restored the plane to “just off the assembly line” condition.

Since his grandson Mike and his friends used it as the official clubhouse of the Last Chance Detectives, Pop had made a few upgrades as well. The B-17 was now wired with electricity, a radio, a phone, and other modern conveniences. Pop even helped them set up a darkroom in the bomb bay so the young detectives could develop photographs.

Bathed in red light, Spence was currently using the darkroom to process the pictures Doc Benson had taken of the parchment. As Mike stood behind him and watched, Spence took several prints out of their chemical bath and hung them on an overhead line to dry.

“Looking good, Spence!” Mike said as he studied the photos. “It was smart to develop the film here. If it really turns out to be a treasure map, we don’t want anybody else getting a look at it.”

“I’ve made several copies at various exposures just to be safe,” Spence said.

“Let’s pick the best one and show it to the others!”



Doc Benson, Smitty, Ben, and Winnie sat expectantly around the card table toward the front of the plane. As Mike pulled

back the darkroom curtains and walked forward with a photo, their eyes grew wide with anticipation.

“Let’s see!” Winnie squealed.

“Did they turn out?” Ben asked.

“They sure did!” Mike handed the picture to Doc Benson.
“I think this is the best one.”

“I didn’t get a good look at the parchment because I was working so quickly.” Doc carefully studied the image through a magnifying glass. “This is fantastic, even better than I had hoped. It’s definitely a map!”

A cheer went up from the small group. Even Smitty couldn’t help but let out a triumphant hoot.

“A map to what?” Winnie asked.

“The writing is in Spanish . . .” Doc began.

“I know Spanish!” said Winnie.

“As do I.” Doc peered closely at the map. “It says, ‘La Cámara de la Corona del Rey.’”

Winnie’s eyes grew wider. “The Chamber of the King’s Crown!”

“It is treasure!” Ben pumped his fists in the air.

“Crown? What’s the king’s crown?” Mike asked.

“It can mean only one thing: the crown of the great Aztec emperor Montezuma!” Doc Benson continued to study the map. “It’s been missing ever since Spanish conquistadors destroyed the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. Some legends claimed that it might be among Coronado’s treasures. I’d stake my reputation that this map now verifies that!”

Mike leaned over and pointed at a detail on the map.
“Could that be Saddleback Butte?”

“Sure looks like it to me,” said Smitty as he squinted at the map.

“The Spanish at this time were renowned for their detailed map-making skills,” said Doc, tracing his finger across the map. “There’s no compass rose that I can make out, so I can’t tell which way is north or south. I’m also not sure of the map’s scale. But if we can somehow pinpoint one or two landmarks, it should lead us to the treasure chamber.”

“I’ve got an idea.” Spence headed back to the darkroom.

"I've got a computer program that might just do the trick." Spence disappeared into the darkroom for a few minutes before returning with his laptop.

"I've scanned a copy of the treasure map into my computer," Spence said as he placed the laptop on the card table for everyone to see. "Now, using this software, if I lay the scanned photo over a current map of the area . . ."—Spence hit a few keys on the laptop—" . . . and adjust the opacity so I can see through the top layer to the bottom . . ."

Everyone could now see both maps at the same time—one superimposed over the other. It looked impressive, but nothing lined up.

Spence started rotating the images and zooming in and out. Everyone caught on to what he was doing and couldn't help but call out suggestions.

"Pan right, Spence."

"No, he needs to rotate. Not pan."

"More to the left. Left!"

"I think the big mountain needs to go further right."

"That's not a mountain. That's a camel."

"There are no camels around here, Ben!"

"Just shift it over a smidge."

"Can you tilt it and zoom at the same time, Spence?"

Then it happened. It wasn't perfect, but the two maps began to line up.

A gasp went up around the card table.

"We did it," Mike whispered.

Ben could hardly contain himself. "Where does it show the treasure is?"

"Right . . . here." Doc pointed to a mark on the bottom map that now showed through to the top map. "Somewhere along the shoreline of Apache Lake."

"Let's go!" Ben exclaimed.

Smitty looked out the window at the setting sun. "Not enough daylight left. I reckon it's gonna have to wait until tomorrow. Will that work for you, Doc?"

Doctor Benson continued to stare at the overlaid maps. "You don't have to twist my arm."

“Don’t forget to bring the key, Sheriff Smitty,” Ben said. Smitty shook his head. “I told you before. I can’t do that.”

“We just want to borrow it!” Winnie pleaded.

“Was that waterfall on public land or private?” Smitty asked the group. No one could answer. “Perhaps it’s on part of the Navajo reservation. We don’t know. The boundaries out there can be confusing to even the best surveyor. We’re just gonna have to do without the key until this whole thing’s cleared up.”

Smitty’s announcement took the air out of the room. Everyone was clearly disappointed.

“That doesn’t mean we can’t go and check out the place marked on the map,” Smitty said. “I happen to know that Apache Lake is on public land. I did a little research last night and discovered that this state has a ‘finders keepers’ law that lets you lay claim to any discovered treasure as long as it was found on public land and is more than 100 years old.”

“That’s great!” Mike exclaimed.

“Do we get to keep all of it?” Ben asked.

“Well, they’d probably tax us,” Spence said. “But who cares if we’re filthy rich!”

“One thing.” Doc Benson looked at the group soberly. “What we’ve discovered stays within this group. As I said before: There are ruthless people out there who would stop at nothing to get their hands on this treasure.”

“Absolutely!” said Mike as the others nodded. “Then it’s settled. We’ll meet back here first thing in the morning.”

Chapter 9

FOR PERHAPS THE FIRST TIME IN HIS LIFE, Ben Jones was running ahead of schedule. It was still early in the morning as he pedaled his bike over to the Last Chance Gas and Diner, happily daydreaming of what he would do with his share of the treasure. Ben's nostrils caught a whiff of frying bacon and homemade cinnamon rolls coming from the diner, but it wasn't even a temptation this morning. Nothing would stop him from enjoying the riches that surely awaited!

Ben arrived exactly two minutes and seventeen seconds early, finding Mike, Winnie, and Spence already standing outside the B-17. They didn't look happy. Smitty and Doc Benson were nowhere to be seen.

"What's with the long faces?" Ben dropped his bike next to them. "Where are Smitty and Doc?"

"We've got some bad news," Mike warned.

"No, not bad news! Why can't it be good news?" Ben whined.

"You want the good news?" Winnie asked.

"Yes."

"The emergency sprinkler system at the coroner's office works great."

"There was a fire?"

"Worse than that," Mike explained. "It looks like someone used explosives to blow a hole in the wall. Doc and Smitty already headed over there to assess the damage."

"I can't believe it! I guess it was all just too good to be true," Ben complained. He picked his bike up off the ground. "Let's get over there and see what happened."



It was impossible to miss the four-foot-wide hole in the outer wall of the coroner's office. Broken cinder blocks lay scattered about. Inside the office, a thin veil of smoke still hung in the air. Water from the ceiling sprinklers slowly dripped onto the blackened mess below.

As the kids watched, Smitty and Doc stepped carefully through the wreckage, assessing what they could salvage.

"They got the key," Smitty announced in disgust. "Looks like they used some sort of torch to cut through the metal lockbox."

"I was afraid this might happen," Doc said. "The treasure was just too fantastic to remain a secret."

"I bet someone saw our picture in the paper and recognized the key with Coronado's seal," Spence said.

"I know one thing," said Mike, looking through the debris. "The blast happened at 2:27 a.m."

"How do you know that?" Smitty asked.

Mike held up a wall clock with a shattered face. The hands were frozen at 2:27. "It stopped working when the explosion occurred."

"That's helpful," Doc said, "but I wish we had more to go on."

"Hey, Mike!" Smitty called. "Climb up on this file cabinet and see if you can reach the ceiling."

Smitty gave Mike a boost up onto the five-foot-high cabinet. He could now easily reach the suspended ceiling.

"What am I looking for?"

"See that ceiling tile with the small hole in the corner?" Smitty asked.

"Yeah."

"Push it up and out of the way and let me know if you see anything."

"Okay."

"The old coroner, Pearl Sternhagen, suspected that her janitor was stealing from her a few years back. I helped her install a security camera up there," Smitty said.

"Found it!" Mike said.

"There should be a box with a video recorder in it up

there as well. Bring them both down.”

“Do you think you’ve captured the culprit on tape, Sheriff?” Doc asked.

“As long as the fire system didn’t damage the electronics, we should be able to see the whole thing.”

“Sheriff?” Spence had a concerned look on his face.

“Perhaps we should retrieve my computer and the photos of the map out of the B-17, just to be safe.”

“Good thinking, Spence. Take Ben with you. Two people are safer than one.”

As Spence and Ben ran off on their mission, Smitty called after them: “And watch out for a very big, very tall man!”

“We will!” they yelled back.

“Who’s this tall man, Sheriff?” Doc inquired.

“Some stranger in town came by my office yesterday, asking Arlene about the kids’ picture in the newspaper. She didn’t get his name.”

“What did he look like?” Mike asked.

“Really, really big was all she said. Oh, and he spoke Spanish. She was so upset by the whole encounter that I didn’t want to bother her with any more questions last night. Perhaps I can revisit it with her later today.”

“We should send Winnie over,” Mike suggested. “She’s a really good artist and could probably get enough details out of Arlene to draw a composite sketch.”

“Is that right, Winnie?”

“Yes, sir.” Winnie nodded. “I’ve done it for a few of our cases before. Like Mrs. Holzer’s missing Dachshund puppy. My sketch looked just like him.”

“Right.” Smitty wasn’t quite sold. Drawing a dog and drawing a person were two very different things, but he didn’t see the harm in letting her try.

“Well, go see what you can do. I’ll let Arlene know you’re on the way.”

Smitty returned his attention to the security camera.

“Mike, see if you can dig up a television monitor around here. Doc, let’s figure out how to play back the security footage. I want to see the face of the person behind this whole mess.”



A beat-up yellow 1980 Ford Pinto with “Ugly Duckling Car Rental” painted on the doors pulled into the parking lot of Floyd Needham’s Big Chief Burgers. (On this day, the World’s Largest Snow Cone happened to be flavored Ostrich Orange, but that’s a story for another time.)

The driver turned off the ignition, and the car continued to run in place for several seconds before finally coughing out one final backfire. A blue haze of exhaust fumes hung in the air as the driver pried himself out of the vehicle and approached the counter.

Floyd Needham couldn’t help but notice how unusually large his new customer was and wondered how he had possibly fit into the compact car.

“What can I get you?” Floyd asked, trying not to stare.

The large man leaned down to order through the window. “Habla español, señor?”

“Nope. Don’t speak Spanish myself.” Floyd pointed to the oversized menu on the window. Each menu item featured not only a description but also a color picture. “Just point at what you want, and I’ll get it for you faster than you can say ‘Jack Robinson!’”

The stranger pointed to a bottle of Coca-Cola.

“One Coke, coming right up! We still serve it in the bottle around here. Stays colder that way.” Floyd dug a bottle out of a tub of ice and set it on the counter. “That’ll be a buck and a quarter.”

The stranger looked at him blankly.

“Pesos? Dinero?” Floyd knew a handful of words in Spanish, but he’d just about used them all up.

The large man reached into his pocket, dug around a moment, and then finally held out an open hand. In his massive palm, he had a few wadded-up bills, various coins, and an old key with an ornate C engraved on the handle.

Floyd took a single dollar bill and a quarter out of the man’s hand. “We’re all square. Thank you kindly, sir!”

The stranger motioned for Floyd to look at something and

pulled a folded-up newspaper out of his pocket.

Floyd leaned over and saw the photo of the Last Chance Detectives alongside a close-up picture of the key. "Say, that's the same key! Are you friends of theirs or something?"

"Where . . ." The man struggled to find the words. "I . . . find . . . ?" He pointed at the picture of the kids.

"Oh, I got ya! You want me to tell you where to find them. See, that's gonna be sort of difficult since neither of us speak ___"

The whirl of bicycle chains caught Floyd's ear. He looked up in time to see Ben and Spence speed by the burger stand on their way to the B-17.

"This is your lucky day, friend." Floyd pointed at the boys pedaling into the distance. "There go two of 'em right now."

The stranger turned, saw the boys, and quickly ran to his car. It took him a while but somehow he managed to squeeze himself back into the small Pinto. He turned the car's ignition key, but it didn't want to start. He tried several more times, but the engine only coughed and sputtered. The large man continued to engage the ignition with one hand while pounding the steering wheel in frustration with the other. The battery sounded depleted. Each turn of the engine was slower than the last. But just when it seemed that all hope was lost, the Pinto fired to life.

"You forgot your Coke!" Floyd yelled from the counter.

The Pinto showered the storefront with loose gravel as it sped away.

Floyd waved. "Glad I could help!"

Chapter 10

MIKE, SMITTY, AND DOC BENSON cleared off a table in the corner of the coroner's office to work. After connecting the security camera's recording unit to a small television monitor, they crossed their fingers and turned the system on.

The monitor blinked to life, displaying a wide-angle shot of the room.

"It works!" Mike exclaimed.

"Captures everything from the last twenty-four hours," Smitty said. "We don't want to sit through the whole thing, but luckily there's a time stamp burned into the recording."

Smitty began to fast-forward through the footage. "Mike, what time did you say that clock face was frozen at again?" he asked.

"2:27 a.m."

"We're coming up to that now." Smitty pressed another button, and the video began to play at normal speed. The time stamp in the upper corner of the screen read 2:26 a.m.

"Should happen any time now."

On the television monitor, the coroner's office looked exactly as it had the day before—neat and orderly. The picture quality was a little grainy since the room was dimly lit.

Suddenly, a large flash lit up the screen and the room seemed to shake. Cinder blocks that had once been part of the wall flew inward. Desks and chairs were tossed across the room as though they were toys. The ceiling fan was torn loose and disappeared somewhere off-screen.

"Whoever did this wasn't fooling around," Doc remarked.

They continued watching as the smoke slowly began to clear. A large hole was clearly visible in the wall, and a shadowy figure approached the opening.

If our suspect is who we think it is—a big, tall guy—how’s he gonna fit through that little hole? Mike wondered.

The figure slowly entered the room.

“We’ve got you now!” Smitty growled. “Smile for the camera!”

Suddenly the fire sprinkler system kicked on, showering everything on-screen with water and obscuring their view.

“No!” Doc yelled. “Of all the lousy . . . wait, I can still see something!”

They could barely make out the movements of a blurry figure amid the poor lighting and the water showering down from the ceiling.

“Looks like he’s carrying something,” Mike said.

Smitty leaned forward, trying to make out details on the screen. “I see it too. I think that’s his cutting torch.”

The grainy figure in the video footage moved quickly, making a beeline for the lockbox.

“Look at that,” Doc said. “It’s as if he knows exactly where to go!”

The bright flare of the torch lit up the screen as the figure reached up to begin cutting.

“What in the blue blazes! How’s that possible?” Smitty asked. “The lockbox I put the key in was only four feet off the ground. But he has to reach up to it?”

“That means he’s . . .”—Mike stared at the screen in disbelief—“. . . really small?”

The emergency sprinkler system finally turned off, giving everyone a slightly better view. But the dim lights meant the figure was still little more than just a dark shape. Whoever it was finished cutting open the metal box, opened the lid, then quickly reached in and grabbed the key. Without wasting another second, the small figure gathered up his tools and hurried back the way he came. Faster than anyone expected, he scampered out through the hole and disappeared into the night.

Smitty smacked the table. “We didn’t even get a face!”

“What strikes me is that he wasn’t interested in anything else—just the key. And he knew exactly where he would find

it.” Doc scratched his chin, deep in thought. “The other remarkable thing was his size. Why, he must be a child!”

Mike suddenly felt all eyes on him.

“Well, don’t look at me,” he said defensively. “None of the Last Chance Detectives would ever do anything like that.”

“Of course not,” Doc assured him. “I didn’t mean to suggest otherwise.”

“Although it would sure rule out any suspicions if you knew where everyone was last night at 2:27,” Smitty said.

“Well, do you, Mike?”

“Do I what?”

“Know where everybody was last night?”

“Not really,” Mike said. “But I’m sure everyone went to bed early. We were all looking forward to searching for the treasure today.”

“I know you were.” Smitty affectionately ruffled Mike’s hair. “Besides, that figure looked even smaller than any of you kids. Which brings up an interesting idea. I wonder if it could have been some sort of trained animal.”

“You mean like a monkey?” Mike asked.

Doc shook his head. “I don’t think it would be possible to train an animal to do such a complicated task in such a short amount of time. In my line of work, I’ve studied both human and simian anatomy, and it didn’t move at all like an ape. Definitely human.”

Smitty took a toothpick from his shirt pocket and began chewing on it as he mulled over the evidence. “What’s still bothering me is that whoever’s behind all this seems to know every bit of information that we do—right down to where we stored the key.”

Mike suddenly looked worried. “Maybe I ought to go check on Ben and Spence.”

“Good idea,” Smitty said. He bent down to look at the television monitor again. “Doc and I are gonna go over this footage one more time to see if we can make out a face.”



“That’s his face!” Arlene shrieked.

Winnie looked down at the composite pencil sketch she had just completed. "Are you sure you don't want me to add any more details?"

"I'm sure. That's the creepy man who came by here yesterday. You've captured him perfectly! Winnie, you really are talented."

"Thank you." Winnie smiled proudly. "I just drew what you described."

"There's only one thing wrong with it."

"What's that?"

"He was taller."

"Taller?"

"Much!"

"Well, this is just his face. Composite sketches don't focus on the body."

"I thought you wanted it to be accurate."

"I do."

"Well, he was taller."

Winnie and Arlene stood about the same height. Winnie held the picture as high as she could. "How's this?"

Arlene smiled. "Perfect!"

"Can I use your fax machine?" Winnie asked. "I want to send this out to Smitty and the gang as quickly as I can."

"No problem. It's right in the back."



Ben and Spence had no idea they were being followed when they pulled their bikes up to the B-17.

"At least we've still got the map," Ben said. "I'm not sure what good that key is without it."

"I'll feel a whole lot better once I get my computer and those photos," Spence said.

Ben began to reach for the plane's door handle when Spence grabbed his arm and stopped him.

"Wait! The alarm system!"

"Ooh! Almost forgot."

"Here, let me disarm it."

Twenty yards away, a pale yellow Ford Pinto pulled up to

the pumps at Last Chance Gas.

Inside the vehicle, the tall stranger peered out the front windshield at two boys entering the old warplane. He looked down at the newspaper photo in his lap and back toward the plane. A smile crept across his face.

Chapter 11

“GOOD THING YOU REMINDED ME about that alarm system,” Ben said as he followed Spence into the B-17.

Spence looked around the interior of the plane. “There’s no sign that anyone tried to break in here. Grab my laptop while I get the photos of the map out of the darkroom.”

“Okay, but . . .” Ben noticed a fresh printout in the fax machine. “Hey, check this out.”

Spence paused before going into the darkroom. “What is it?”

“It’s from Winnie. It’s her sketch of the suspect.” Ben held the fax up for Spence to see. “He looks pretty creepy, huh?”

Spence leaned over Ben’s shoulder to get a closer look. “Yeah, I wouldn’t want to meet that guy in a dark alley.”

“Let’s get our stuff and get out of here before—” Ben lowered the fax paper and gasped.

Just outside the plane, only a few feet away, the face from the printout was staring at them intently through the window.

“It’s him!” Ben shrieked. “The tall guy!”

The face disappeared from the window.

“He’s moving toward the door.” A look of panic came over Ben’s face. “Spence, do something!”

“The alarm!” Spence crawled frantically toward a lever marked “Burglar Alarm.”

The door to the B-17 opened, and the tall stranger bent over to enter.

“Too late!” Ben cried. “We’re doomed!”

“Not quite.” Spence pulled the lever.

A deafening alarm immediately began to shriek. The siren’s speaker was mere inches from the stranger’s head. He clasped his hands over both his ears to muffle the earsplitting sound.

“That’s phase one!” Spence yelled to Ben. “Here comes two!”

A spring-loaded arm launched a bag of flour directly at the huge man. It hit him squarely in the face and burst open. The man’s torso was now completely white, his eyes blinded by the thick powder.

Falling to his knees, the stranger put out his arms to steady himself. His hands landed on a square metal plate in the floor.

“Phase three!” Spence yelled.

The stranger suddenly convulsed and shrieked in pain as blue electrical arcs webbed around his fingers.

“Got him!” Spence exclaimed.

Ben looked at the stranger. He was coughing from a mouthful of flour, holding his hands in pain, but definitely regaining his composure.

“I think we only made him mad!” Ben began digging through his pockets. “Time for phase four.”

“There is no phase four,” Spence reminded him.

“There is now!” In one quick motion, Ben lit the fuse of a small round firework and tossed it toward the stranger. It landed where he was crouched, went off with a boom, and began releasing thick black smoke. The back of the plane filled with a billowing dark cloud.

Spence grabbed Ben’s shoulder. “Let’s get out of here. Out the front hatch!”

“Right behind you!”



Mike Fowler feared he had arrived too late. He could hear muffled yells and banging coming from inside the *Lady Liberty*. Thick smoke poured out of the door. He was trying to decide what to do when the small front hatch of the B-17 dropped open and Ben and Spence spilled out.

“Spence! Ben!” Mike ran to their side. “What’s going on?”

“The tall stranger. He’s in there, Mike!” said Spence, trying to catch his breath.

“Did he get the map?” Mike asked.

Ben hung his head. "I panicked in all the excitement and forgot the computer. It's still in there."

"I don't think I got all the photos either," Spence admitted.

"We can't let him get a copy of the map." Mike waved for them to follow. "Come on!"

"No way!" Ben shook his head. "I'm not going back in there. That'd be like going into a cave with an angry bear!"

"Me neither," Spence said.

"Okay, you two go get help! Call Sheriff Smitty from the diner." Mike studied the B-17. "I'm gonna see if I can somehow sneak in and get our stuff."

As Ben and Spence ran to the diner, Mike tried to come up with a plan. If the stranger chased after Ben and Spence, maybe he was still in the front of the plane.

Mike snuck up to the B-17 and slowly stuck his head inside. The smoke was clearing, but Mike couldn't see any sign of the man. He *could* see that quite a skirmish had occurred. A patch of white flour revealed large handprints, and a set of white footprints led through the radio room and to the closed curtains of the bomb bay that doubled as their darkroom.

Mike spotted Spence's laptop where he had left it near the fax machine. He quietly entered the plane and snuck toward the laptop. He just about had it in his hands when he noticed that the darkroom curtain was moving.

Apparently, the intruder had already found Spence's photos of the map. Mike knew he had to get those photos out of there somehow.

In his ongoing care for the *Lady Liberty*, Pop Fowler made sure that the B-17's fire extinguishers were always fully charged. Mike unclipped one of the extinguishers from its cradle and quietly approached the curtain. He could hear movement on the other side. Gathering all the courage he could muster, he counted to three and pulled back the curtain.

There, on the other side, stood the tall stranger looking down at Spence's photographs. The man's head snapped up just in time to be hit with the full force of the extinguisher's

blast. The stranger yelled and dropped the pictures in order to shield himself from the spray. Mike grabbed up the photos and gave the man one last shot from the extinguisher for good measure. With both the laptop and the photos now in his possession, Mike ran down the aisle of the B-17 as fast as he could. He half expected a large hand to grab him from behind at any moment.

When he reached the door, he couldn't help but look back. The man was still in the darkroom, staggering back and forth amid a dissipating white cloud.

Mike jumped out the door and began running to the diner when he heard a screech of car brakes.

"Mike!" Doc Benson yelled from the window of his Range Rover.

"Doc!" Mike ran to the car. "Am I ever glad to see you!"

"Is that the computer and photos?"

"Yeah, a man almost stole them." Mike pointed to the B-17. "He's still in there!"

"Get in the car!" Doc commanded.



Ben and Spence paused outside of the diner long enough to see Mike climb into the Range Rover.

"Mike!" Ben yelled. The car sped off into the distance.

"Guess he couldn't hear me," Ben said.

Spence pointed across the parking lot. "But *he* did!"

The tall stranger stood just outside the B-17. He shouted something at the boys and started marching toward them.

Ben and Spence hightailed it back into the diner.

Chapter 12

BEHIND THE WHEEL OF HIS RANGE ROVER, Doc Benson looked over at Mike with a concerned expression on his face. “Are you all right, Mike?”

“Yeah.” Mike held up the laptop and photos. “I think I was able to retrieve everything.”

“Good.” Doc handed a backpack to Mike. “You can stow them in here for safekeeping.”

“Will do.”

“So was it the same man who was in Winnie’s sketch?” Doc asked.

“I think so. But you should probably know . . .”

“What’s that?”

“Well, when I went into the B-17, I found him looking at the photos.”

“He saw the map?”

“Yeah, and I’m pretty sure he had enough time to get a good look.”

Doc Benson suddenly looked worried. “That changes things.”

“How so?”

“Up until now, we were the only ones with information about the treasure. Now we have to assume that he knows everything we do.”

“Right,” Mike agreed.

“But if he’s got the key—and I’m guessing he does—then the treasure is no longer safe.”

“So what are we gonna do?”

“Smitty’s headed back to his office. He wants to send Winnie’s composite sketch to other law enforcement agencies. That means it’s up to us to protect the treasure.”

“And how are we gonna do that?” Mike wondered.

"I think we should head out to the general area where the map says the treasure is hidden. Then we'll just sit on it until help arrives. I know I don't get around as well as I used to—and you're only a boy—but I bet the two of us can hold our own."

"I sure hope so," Mike said.



Ben nervously looked out the Last Chance Diner's front window while Spence dropped a quarter into the pay phone and waited.

"Sheriff Smitty? It's Spence. Come quick—we've got your suspect right here at the diner!"

Grandma Fowler was wiping down the lunch counter and couldn't help but overhear. "What's this all about?" she asked Ben.

Ben could see the tall stranger stumbling toward the diner. With each step, Ben grew more panicked. "Where's Pop and Mike's mom?"

"They ran into town for supplies."

"*You're* the only one here?"

"That's right. The lunch crowd came and went."

"Oh boy . . ." Ben moaned.

Grandma Fowler was in her late seventies. Standing just a little over five feet tall with a slender frame, Grandma was not particularly intimidating. In fact, she looked like a light breeze might blow her over.

Spence hung up the phone and called to Ben, "We're supposed to stall him until Smitty arrives."

Ben couldn't believe his ears. "Stall him? How?"

"Stall who?" Grandma Fowler asked.

The tall stranger was almost to the front door of the diner.

"Mrs. Fowler, that man out there will stop at nothing to get something very valuable from us," Ben explained as he looked for a place to hide. "And I'm sorry we got you involved in this."

Grandma looked at the approaching stranger coolly. "Oh, I've been serving truckers for the last forty years, Ben. You

don't have to worry about a little old lady like me . . .”

The door to the diner swung open and the stranger entered. Grandma winked at Ben and Spence, who were now hiding behind the counter.

“. . . but that man sure does!”

The stranger stood in the doorway, scanning the room for the boys. Half of his face and jacket were still covered with white residue from the fire extinguisher.

Through gritted teeth he bellowed: “¿Dónde están los chicos?”

Ignoring the man's question, Grandma walked right up and grabbed him by the arm. “My dear man, you look so tired! Come over here and have a seat.”

Slightly bewildered, the man allowed himself to be led to a booth. “¿Dónde están—?”

“I have absolutely no idea what you're saying,” Grandma interrupted. She pushed him into the booth. “But take a seat and I'll pour you some nice hot coffee.”

“Where . . . is . . . boys?” he struggled to say while trying to peer around her.

Grandma placed a cup in front of the man. “A nice cup of coffee will fix you right up.”

“No coffee!” the man protested.

“So, you *can* speak English. Would you like some cream?”

“No!”

Blocking his way out of the booth, Grandma ignored the man's protests and began to pour. “Always liked cream myself. And a little sugar. But if you like it black, then black it is!”

With the stranger distracted, Ben and Spence saw their chance. They snuck out from behind the counter, tiptoed across the floor, and quickly slipped out the front door without being seen.



Grandma Fowler continued to slowly fill the stranger's coffee cup. “This is freshly brewed, too,” she said. “Nothing worse than stale coffee—makes my stomach acidic. Some people

prefer decaf, but I don't see the point."

The stranger had had enough. He pushed Grandma's arm aside.

Grandma wobbled, overcorrected, then dumped the coffee pot's steaming contents into the man's lap.

"Yeeoooow!" the man screamed.

"See what you made me do?" Grandma headed for the kitchen as the man rocked back and forth in pain. "I've got just the thing back here to fix you up."

The stranger tried to desperately soak up the scalding coffee with some napkins. It took him a moment to realize that he was alone. Emerging from the kitchen, Grandma saw him scramble out of the booth and head for the diner's front door.

"Now you just hang on a minute!" Grandma called.

The man bolted out the door and ran toward his car.



The stranger rounded the front bumper and lurched to a sudden stop.

All four of the car's tires were completely flat. Ben and Spence looked up sheepishly as they finished releasing the air from the last one.

"We can explain!" was all Ben managed to blurt out.

The stranger clenched his fists and literally shook with rage.

Ben and Spence were frozen with fear. The man took a step toward them and . . .

"Hey!" Grandma Fowler called.

Everyone turned to see Grandma standing a few yards away. She was holding a large turkey baster. She squeezed the bulb and red fluid shot out, hitting the man square in the face. The man stood there, momentarily dumbfounded, as the liquid dripped off his forehead and into his eyes.

"Didn't want you to leave without sampling our ghost pepper salsa," Grandma explained.

The man dropped to his knees and began clawing at his face.

Some folks later claimed that they could hear his screams all the way back in town.

Chapter 13

A SIGN READING “BUCK SWEENEY’S BOAT RENTALS” hung over a small, dilapidated shack next to Apache Lake.

A rotund man in shorts and a dirty tank top arranged various fishing lures on the front counter. Sporting a gray goatee on his sun-weathered face, he looked to be the namesake of the place.

Mike and Doc Benson stepped up to the counter, ready to do business.

“Are you Buck?” Mike asked.

“The genuine article,” Buck said with a grin.

“We would like to rent a boat,” Doc said.

“They just restocked the lake and the stripers been really bitin’ lately, which means business has been good,” Buck said. “Them’s all I got left.”

Buck motioned toward his depleted fleet, which was down to a single outboard motorboat, a Jet Ski, and a canoe. “Hope you don’t mind me saying, but I noticed that you’re a bit disabled, sir.” Buck pointed to Doc’s cane. “So the Jet Ski is definitely out. Wouldn’t recommend the canoe either. Too wobbly. Motorboat should do the trick.”

“We’ll take it.” Doc pulled out his wallet to pay.

“One thing though. The floodgate on the dam got stuck in place a couple days ago. Water’s never been this low before. You’ll need to be careful.”

“Be careful of what?” Mike asked.

“With the water this low, you’re gonna hafta keep an eye out for rocks in the shallows. If you don’t watch what you’re doing, it can be a little dangerous.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Doc said, “but I think we’ll manage just fine.”



Smitty headed straight for the Last Chance Gas and Diner as soon as he got the call from Spence. Winnie was at the sheriff's office when the call came in, and she insisted on coming along.

"We don't know what this suspect is capable of, Winnie, so stay in the truck until I can verify that it's safe," Smitty said.

"I will," she assured him.

When they arrived at the diner, they were surprised to find that things looked surprisingly calm. Ben, Spence, and Grandma Fowler casually stood around a dumpster outside the diner. They all had smiles on their faces.

"Looks okay, Winnie. Guess you can come along." Smitty exited his truck and walked up to the group, curiously scratching his head. "You all seem rather calm. What happened?"

"Did he get away?" Winnie asked.

"Nope. We got him right in here!" Ben banged the side of the metal dumpster and a muffled voice groaned in response. "Mission accomplished! You wanted us to keep him here, so we did."

"How'd you get him in there?" Smitty asked.

"He was so tall that it was pretty easy to just push him in," Spence explained. "Besides that, he was sort of blind and disoriented at the time."

"Blind?" Smitty had heard enough. "Maybe you better just open the dumpster and let me see what we've got."

"Are you sure you wanna do that?" Ben asked.

"Yes." Smitty released the safety strap on his holster. "Everyone stand back just in case."

Ben unhooked the lock on the dumpster, threw open the top lid, and ran a safe distance away.

At first, nothing happened.

"You inside!" Smitty called. "Stand up where I can see you. And keep your hands in the air!"

Slowly, unsteadily, the stranger inside stood upright.

His upper torso and the left side of his face were white. The other half of his face was blackened by what looked like smoke. The man's hair was coated with some sort of residue, his eyes were nearly swollen shut, and his pants were soaked and smelled faintly of coffee. A banana peel and some half-eaten fish—gifts from the dumpster—were stuck to his clothes. He looked absolutely miserable.

"What happened to him?" Winnie asked.

"He tried to mess with the wrong little old lady!" Grandma Fowler said.

The stranger clasped his hands together and said something to Smitty that sounded almost like a plea.

"What's he saying?" Smitty asked. "Winnie, can you translate?"

"He says . . . that he's so happy to see you . . . and thankful that you've finally saved him from . . . the crazy old lady."

Grandma shrugged. "I've been called worse."

The man continued to speak in Spanish as Winnie translated. "He says his name is Antonio de Niza, and that he was sent by the Southwest Museum."

"A likely story." Ben eyed him suspiciously.

"De Niza?" Spence wondered aloud. "Like Friar Marcos de Niza?"

The stranger clapped his hands together and pointed at Spence as if he had won a round of charades. "¡Sí! ¡Sí! ¡Soy su descendiente directo!"

Winnie wondered if she had heard him right. "I think he's saying that he is the friar's direct descendant!"

"Oh, no," Smitty said flatly. "Let's help him outta there."

"You believe him?" Ben asked.

"Well, I'm not positive yet, but who would make up something like that?"



After loading a large bag of Doc Benson's equipment onto the boat, Mike pushed the vessel away from the pier.

"Have we got everything, Mike?" Doc asked.

"I think so. The backpack with Spence's computer and the photos of the map, plus your bag of equipment. Man, that was heavy."

"I carry it in my Range Rover when I'm exploring archaeological sites. You know, my hobby. I know it seems like a lot, but it can really come in handy."

Doc directed Mike's attention to a small electronic device in his hand. "Take this receiver, for example. The government released this navigation technology to the public in the 1980s. It's called the Global Positioning System, or GPS for short. Using this in conjunction with Spence's map overlay, we should be able to find the spot where the treasure is located."

Mike could hardly contain his excitement. "What are we waiting for?"



Apache Lake was twelve miles of open water, plus a wide variety of inlets and coves that branched out through the rugged desert terrain.

It took Mike and Doc less than fifteen minutes to arrive at the point indicated on the map. They came to a stop about ten yards offshore of a towering sandstone cliff. Doc turned off the boat's engine while Mike threw the anchor overboard.

Mike looked around, confused. "This can't be the spot."

Doc checked his GPS receiver against Spence's computer overlay of the map. "I've triangulated the interpolation points twice. The GPS is telling me that this is the exact spot where we should find the entrance to the treasure chamber."

"How do you bury treasure in water?" Mike asked.

"This used to be a natural lake," Doc explained, "but government engineers raised the water level by putting in a dam. Back when Coronado and de Niza were here, where we are right now would have been dry ground."

Mike stared at the water. "You mean the treasure is down there?"

"Yes, or at least the *entrance* to the treasure chamber. All this water around us has kept it hidden from modern exploration."

"I bet it's not too deep, either," Mike said. "Remember what Buck told us about the lake being at its lowest level?"

"I sure do. That means the entrance could be just below the surface." Doc rubbed his hands together like a kid on Christmas morning. "Wish I could go down there right now and check it out!"

Mike studied the water for several seconds before turning to Doc. "How about if I dive in and take a quick look?"

"Oh, I don't know, Mike. We're just supposed to be watching the site until Smitty and the others get here."

"It wouldn't take but a second."

"You don't even have a swimsuit."

"I could cut the legs off my jeans. Make 'em into cutoffs!"

"Don't twist my arm, Mike. I'm tempted enough as it is." Doc looked at the water and slowly smiled. "I want to know what's down there just as much as you do."

"What's it gonna hurt to just take a look?"

"Nothing, I suppose." Doc laughed.

"All right," Mike said. "Let's do this!"

Mike quickly emptied his pockets into the backpack. A few minutes later, he hit the water with a splash.

"It's a little colder than I thought!" he yelled up to Doc.

"Promise me you'll be careful and take no risks!"

"I promise!" Mike took a deep breath and disappeared under the water.

Chapter 14

THE LAKE WATER WAS INCREDIBLY CLEAR. Even without a diving mask, Mike could see relatively well in all directions. He was surprised to find that the lake was even shallower than he imagined. Buck Sweeney wasn't kidding when he said the water level was low; the lake bottom was less than twelve feet below the boat.

Mike used his first dive to just get his bearings. He spent the second dive trying to focus on finding some sort of entrance that might lead to the treasure. After about a minute of searching, he resurfaced to get a fresh breath of air.

"Wow! You can really hold your breath a long time," Doc yelled from the boat.

"Ben and I like to see who can stay underwater the longest. I once held my breath for nearly three minutes."

"Well, don't stay down that long, or I'll have to come in after you. And with these bad legs that wouldn't be good. Did you see anything?"

"Just an old fishing pole somebody dropped. Do you think they might have buried the treasure?"

"Maybe, but I doubt it. The way it's drawn on the map it looks like there's some sort of entrance."

Mike pointed to another part of the sandstone cliff. "I'm gonna check over there next."

Mike swam over to the cliff's edge, took a deep breath, and dropped beneath the surface. Once again, he found nothing that remotely resembled a door or an entrance. Then he noticed a large sheet of sandstone rock that must have broken off the face of the cliff and slid into the water. It leaned at an angle against the cliff, creating what looked like an opening at its base. Mike dove down deeper to get a better look. It definitely wasn't an entrance itself, but looking into

the opening, Mike could make out what looked like a dark hole at the base of the cliff. It *could* be an entrance, or maybe it was just an indentation in the rock.

Mike surfaced and called to Doc, "I might have found something!"

"What is it?"

"It might be nothing, but I found a crevice in the cliff that's hidden behind a large rock."

"How deep in does it go?"

"I couldn't tell. It was too dark."

"Hold on a second." Doc rummaged through his equipment bag and pulled out a plastic flashlight. "This should help."

"Won't the water wreck it?" Mike asked.

"It's waterproof," said Doc as he tossed the flashlight to Mike. "And it has a pretty strong beam. You should be able to see right into that crevice."

Mike took four deep breaths, holding each for a couple of seconds before exhaling.

"You be careful!" Doc warned. "Hyperventilating like that might allow you to hold your breath longer, but it can also make you lightheaded."

"I'll be careful." Mike took one last deep breath and dove underwater.



Sheriff Smitty leaned against the back wall of the Last Chance Diner, holding the pay phone's receiver to his ear.

"Yes . . . Thanks for the information . . . We'll take good care of him. S'long now."

Smitty hung up the phone, took a deep breath, and walked to the front of the diner where everyone had gathered. The stranger sat quietly with his handcuffed wrists resting on one of the tables. Though his eyes were not nearly as swollen as before, he stared off into the distance. He was clearly still a bit shell-shocked from his experience with Grandma Fowler.

As Smitty approached with his hat in his hands, Spence asked, "Well, what did they say?"

"His story checks out. His name really is Antonio de Niza, and he was sent from the Southwest Museum."

"Oh, no!" Grandma gasped.

"How do we know this is the *real* de Niza?" Ben peered at the man. "He could be impersonating him."

"They described him for me in great detail." Smitty began unlocking the man's handcuffs. "It's pretty hard to impersonate someone who is six foot seven."

"Oh, no!" repeated Grandma, this time more gravely.

"Yep. We're gonna be lucky if he doesn't decide to press charges."

"I'm so sorry!" Grandma Fowler reached across the table to comfort the big man.

Antonio de Niza reflexively jerked his hands away and eyed her suspiciously.



About nine feet below the lake's surface, Mike Fowler approached the dark crevice and directed the flashlight beam into the darkness.

He could now see that it wasn't a mere cavity in the rock face. It was a passage!

When Mike swam closer to see how far back the passage went, his eyes caught sight of a flash of light. Mike turned off the flashlight and realized that he could see a beam of sunlight shining into the water just a few yards ahead.

Could it be some kind of opening to fresh air?

Mike paused momentarily to consider whether he should go further. He knew Doc Benson didn't like him taking chances, but the beam of light was right there! It was hardly a risk. Mike had plenty of air left in his lungs and knew he could easily make it back if he found nothing.

He impulsively made his way down the passage. The light was directly above him now. Mike swam toward it and surfaced into fresh air.

He thought he was in an underground cave at first, but as Mike's eyes adjusted, he realized it was actually a large fissure in the great sandstone slab. The light came in through a crack

in the rock above. A ray of sunlight shone directly into the small pool where he was treading water. The fissure was small at the top and wider near the bottom, creating a natural cave-like expanse.

Mike climbed out of the pool and up a fairly sharp incline. Until now everything inside the cavern looked like it had formed naturally, but the steep path led to an opening in the rock. The opening was like an arched doorway. Its shape left little doubt that it was man-made.

Beyond the doorway was pitch blackness. Mike turned on the flashlight and the beam revealed an almost perfectly round chamber. Intricate carvings and etchings covered the walls. He was startled to see what looked like the remains of several ancient bodies. The nearest form was curled up next to a large wooden cask. It was encased in the full body armor of a conquistador, with a rusted sword in its outstretched skeletal arm.

Though there were many more details to take in, Mike had seen enough. He couldn't wait to get back and tell Doc what he had discovered.

Chapter 15

WHEN MIKE FINALLY SURFACED NEXT TO THE BOAT, Doc Benson let out a big sigh of relief.

“Mike! I thought for sure something had happened to you!”

“I’m fine,” Mike assured him. “But . . .”

“Don’t ever do that again! I was worried sick that—”

“You’re not gonna believe it!” Mike interrupted. “We found it! It’s all there, just like the map said!”

“The treasure?”

“Well, I didn’t actually see any treasure. But it’s *got* to be there!”

“Hold on, Mike. Start from the beginning.” Doc reached out a hand and helped Mike into the boat. “Tell me everything.”

“The dark crevice I found underwater *was* an entrance, just like we suspected. I could see sunlight on the other side, so I swam toward it.”

“Good grief! You shouldn’t have done that, Mike.”

“I came up over there.” Mike pointed to the sandstone cliff. “See that crack in the rock face?”

“Yes.” Doc could see a crack that ran all the way down to the cliff’s base.

“That crack becomes much bigger inside. Once I was inside, I climbed up a path and found an archway that went into a round chamber.”

“Go on . . .”

“The chamber had writings all over the walls. And on the floor—skeletons. Conquistador skeletons.”

Doc’s eyes were wide with wonder. “Are you sure, Mike?”

“Absolutely! If only you could see it!”

“Maybe I can.” Doc began digging through his bag of

equipment. "Mike, pull up the anchor so we can ground the boat on that sandbar."

"There's no way you're gonna be able to squeeze through that crack, Doc. It's too small."

"Then we'll just have to make it bigger!" Doc found what he was looking for and pulled it out of the bag. "This should do it."

Mike looked at the red sticks in Doc's hands. "*Dynamite?*"



A hearty bowl of tomato soup, a grilled cheese sandwich, and a side salad were placed in front of Antonio de Niza. He looked up at the people around him and tipped his head. "Gracias."

"He says, 'Thank you,'" Winnie translated.

"We all understood that," Ben said. "What else has he been saying?"

Winnie sat beside de Niza and read back her notes. "He told me that he represents a historical society from Spain that's been working with the Southwest Museum. Together they've been trying to trace the historical journey of Francisco Coronado through North America."

"Sí." De Niza looked up from his food, reached into his pocket, and set an ornate key on the table. "Coronado."

"He's got the key!" Ben exclaimed. "I knew we shouldn't trust him."

"Hold on, Ben," Smitty warned. "Let's not start down that road again."

Spence peered closely at the key on the table. "That's not the same key. It's a duplicate. Look how much cleaner it is—no mineral deposits."

De Niza pointed at the key and said something to Winnie in Spanish.

Winnie listened and nodded. "He says this key has been passed down through his family for generations, but it's been useless in helping them actually find the treasure. The discovery of the new key is only important in that it authenticates the map we found."

Ben's eyes grew big. "So, our map really does lead to a treasure?"

"He believes it is one of the most important archaeological finds of all time!"

De Niza leaned over and asked Winnie a question.

"He wants to know when he can see the map," she said.

Smitty suddenly looked puzzled. "Where is the map?"

"It's okay," Spence assured him. "Mike and Doctor Benson retrieved my computer and all the copies. They took off with everything in Doc's car when we thought Mr. de Niza was trying to steal the map."

"Where are they now?"

Spence looked to Ben, who shrugged. "I'm not sure."

Smitty unhooked the police radio from his belt. "Arlene, come in. Over."

"This is Arlene. Go ahead, Smitty. Over."

"Arlene, call Doc Benson and have him get in touch with me here at the diner. Over."

"Copy that."

Smitty turned to Ben. "Did Mike have his walkie-talkie with him today?"

"I don't think so."

"Should we be concerned, Smitty?" Grandma Fowler asked.

"I don't think so. Wherever they are, I'm sure they're being very careful."



BAROOOOOM! The sandstone cliff erupted in a mighty explosion. Rocks and sand rained down as Doc Benson and Mike took refuge behind a large boulder. When the smoke and dust finally cleared, a large hole appeared in the sandstone face.

"Are you okay, Mike?" Doc asked.

"Yeah, I think so." Mike was stunned by how fast things were moving.

"Well, we did it!" Doc Benson slung his equipment bag onto his back and hobbled toward the opening. "We're so

close to the treasure now that I can almost taste it!”

Mike had heard stories of people being bit by the gold bug before, how the promise of riches could cause them to become somewhat irrational. Mike wondered if he was seeing a bit of that in Doc now.

“C’mon!” Doc urged. In his haste, Doc almost lost his footing. He caught himself with his cane and pushed his stiff legs forward as fast as they could carry him.

Mike followed from a few yards back. “Shouldn’t we wait until the others arrive?”

“Nonsense!” Doc paused at the opening in the cliff and looked into the darkness. “If we wait too long, it could get dark. Others could get in ahead of us and steal everything.”

Mike looked at his watch. “But it’s just a little after noon.”

“Let’s go, Mike.” Doc entered the cavern. “Adventure awaits!”

Chapter 16

DOC BENSON COULDN'T HELP BUT GASP at what he saw when the flashlight beam lit up the circular chamber.

It was just as Mike had described. Several skeletons littered the room, all dressed in conquistador armor. Empty wooden crates and barrels were in various states of decay. The walls of the chamber were etched with intricate designs, illustrations, and words in foreign tongues. Thick cobwebs and heavy dust made it obvious that no one had disturbed the chamber in centuries.

"It's fantastic." Doc carefully stepped into the chamber. "It reminds me of an Anasazi burial chamber. Perhaps that's what it was originally."

"I don't see any treasure," Mike noted.

"I'm sure it's here." Doc's flashlight beam landed on the far wall. "Look at that!"

The wall was engraved with line after line of words that Mike couldn't understand. "Is that Spanish?" he asked.

"Correct." Doc's eyes flashed back and forth as he read the lengthy inscription on the wall. "It's the last testament of the men who died here. It says that they were part of Coronado's expedition, specifically assigned as de Niza's treasure guards. It explains that they were separated from the others by the Apache and holed up in here for months. They loyally guarded the treasure while they waited to be rescued." Doc stopped reading and turned to Mike. "Obviously, no one ever came."

"The body we found behind the waterfall must've been a member of this party," Mike said.

"You might be right. Maybe he was out hunting for food when the Apache caught up with him." Doc pointed to the bodies lying on the floor next to open crates and casks. "And

these guys didn't fare much better. It's plain to see that they eventually ran out of supplies. It's just a miracle they lasted as long as they did."

"They sure kept busy all that time. Look at all this." Mike pointed to the opposite side of the room. Engravings of various animals and human figures were carved into the sandstone walls. "But what happened to the treasure? Do you think it's already been taken?"

"I don't see any sign of looters. I'm sure the armor and swords would've been long gone if that was the case."

"Then where is it?"

"I don't know." Doc studied the walls. "But my guess is that they left some clues in here—somewhere—in case someone from the expedition finally came back."

"Look!" Mike's eyes landed on an ornate doorframe that had been carved into the rock wall. Mike gave the door a hard push, but the slab didn't budge a bit. If it actually was a door, and not just part of the wall, it must have weighed several tons. That's when something on the door's surface caught Mike's eye.

"I might have something here," he said.

Mike wiped his arm across the doorframe, clearing away years of accumulated cobwebs. Then he leaned in and blew as hard as he could. A thick layer of dust flew off, revealing letters carved into the surface below. A closer look showed that the letters formed words: "REGIS CUBICULUM TRANSIBANT." Below that, in smaller letters, it read: "AD UNUM SOLVIT DIDRAGMA."

"Good job, Mike!" Doc joined him in examining the doorframe.

Mike pointed to the engraving. "That's not Spanish."

"No, it's not. It's Latin."

"If they started the carvings in Spanish, why would they switch to Latin?"

Doc thought for a minute, then suddenly threw up his hands. "Of course! It all makes sense now."

"What does?"

"Mike, if you wanted to leave clues to the treasure's

location, but wanted to make sure that only de Niza or someone like him would understand, what would you do?”

Mike really had no idea, but he took a guess. “Maybe I’d write the clues in Latin?”

“Exactly!”

Mike still wasn’t following. “And why would I do that?”

“Because at that time in Spain the common man didn’t understand Latin. Only priests, who were required to study their Bible in Latin, were fluent in the language. Unless you were de Niza or another holy man, you would likely never discover the treasure.”

“What do the words on the door say?”

Doc let his fingers glide along the indentions of the letters in the rock. “I’m a little rusty, but I’m pretty sure that this first line reads: ‘The King’s Chamber.’”

Mike’s eyes grew big. “Whoa!”

“This second line I’m not so sure of. It appears to be a riddle. ‘Ad unum solvit didragma’ translates to something along the lines of: ‘To enter, you have to pay a temple tax.’ I’m not sure I know what that means.”

“Sounds familiar . . .” Mike paused.

The chamber was quiet as they both tried to think.

Suddenly Mike’s eyes lit up. “Wait a second! Pastor Givens just preached something about a temple tax a few weeks ago.”

“In church?”

“Yeah.” Mike reached into the backpack for the Bible he typically kept in his back pocket—the same Bible his dad gave him the last time they were together.

“I think we were at the end of Matthew.” Mike quickly flipped through the pages. “Let’s see . . .”

“I’m impressed. Do you always carry that with you?” Doc asked.

“Pretty much. I took it out before I dove in the water, but otherwise . . .” Mike found what he was looking for. “Here it is. The disciples wanted to know how Jesus planned to pay the temple tax and this is what He said . . .”

Doc peered over his shoulder as Mike began to read.

“Matthew, chapter seventeen, verse twenty-seven: “But

we don't want to make them angry. So go to the lake and throw out your fishing line. Take the first fish you catch. Open its mouth. There you will find the exact coin you need. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.””

Mike lowered the Bible as they both pondered what it meant.

“Well, we've got a lake outside, but unfortunately I didn't bring any fishing tackle,” Doc joked.

“I don't think we'll need it.” Mike pointed a flashlight at one of the illustrations carved into the opposite wall. It depicted a fisherman with a single large fish caught in his net. “Did you notice that the fish's mouth is open?” Mike asked as he moved to take a closer look.

Doc followed on his heels. “Yeah, right where there's some sort of hole in the wall.”

Mike tried to shine the flashlight into the hole. “I can't see anything. It bends at a real sharp angle. Do I just stick my hand in there?”

Doc shrugged and warily looked around.

Mike held his hand up to the hole. His fist would have no problem fitting inside.

“Hold on, Mike!” Doc looked straight up. “I didn't notice this before . . .”

Mike lifted his eyes to see that the chamber above them was filled with ancient beams, large wooden cogs, and heavy counterbalancing rocks. “What is all that?” he asked.

“It may be the mechanism that opens the door to the treasure room. Or . . .” Doc's voice trailed off as he considered the possibilities.

“Go on,” Mike encouraged.

“Or this whole room might be an elaborate booby trap.”

Chapter 17

POP FOWLER WALKED INTO THE LAST CHANCE DINER, carrying a load of supplies. He had no idea what had happened while he was away, but he listened intently as the group described how they accidentally mistook the tall stranger for a criminal. He learned that the man was actually from the Southwest Museum and was a direct descendant of the legendary Friar Marcos de Niza.

“Does he know about the map we found?” Pop asked.

“Yeah, but we don’t have a copy to show him,” Smitty explained. “Doc and Mike cleared everything out of here so none of it would fall into the wrong hands. You didn’t happen to see them when you were in town, did you?”

“Nope.”

“I’ve got Arlene trying to contact them now.”

Spence tugged at Smitty’s sleeve. “Sheriff Smitty, there is another possibility. I mean as far as being able to show Mr. de Niza the map.”

“What are you thinking, Spence?”

“Mike got all the copies of the map out of the B-17, but the original camera negative is still in the darkroom.”

“You can make another copy of the map?” Smitty asked.

“I believe I can.”

“Go do it.”

As Spence headed out the front door, Smitty walked Pop over to the table where everyone was gathered around de Niza.

“Pop, this is Antonio de Niza.”

Pop reached across the table and shook de Niza’s hand.

“Proud to meet you, sir!”

“Hola, señor,” de Niza replied.

“He’s from Spain and speaks very little English,” Smitty

explained. “But from what Winnie’s been able to translate, he thinks our map is a pretty big deal.”

“That’s right,” Winnie said. “He says it’s ‘one of the most important archaeological finds of all time,’ to be precise.”

Ben puffed out his chest proudly. “And to think that, thanks to my cannonball, the legendary crown of Montezuma will finally be found!”

“Montezuma?” de Niza shook his head. “No Montezuma.”

“It’s not Montezuma’s crown?” Ben asked. “Then whose is it?”

Winnie translated the question and listened intently as de Niza explained. She scribbled furiously on her pad of paper as he spoke. Everyone tried their best to wait patiently for his response.

Winnie finally looked up from her pad of paper. “He says that although his famous forefather was known as an explorer, the friar’s foremost mission was to introduce Christianity to the inhabitants of the New World. So it’s not the kind of crown you might normally expect.”

“Awwww.” Ben slumped over, visibly disappointed.

De Niza continued to speak, his face animated and intent.

“He says the friar wanted to introduce something to the New World far better than that,” Winnie said.

“All right!” Ben exclaimed.

“But it’s not made of anything precious like gold or silver. It doesn’t have any jewels on it.”

“Awwww!” Ben groaned again.

“This artifact, he says, is far more precious. The crown that the friar brought to help spread this most important message is said to have belonged to . . .” Winnie paused and looked at de Niza. “Are you sure? I mean, ¿está seguro?”

De Niza nodded in the affirmative.

Winnie looked at the group, obviously unsure how she should break the news to them. “You’d better brace yourselves.”

Everyone leaned forward in rapt suspense.

Ben couldn’t contain himself any longer. “Just say it already!”

“He believes the crown was worn by . . . Jesus Christ.”

Chapter 18

MIKE AND DOC BENSON CAREFULLY EXAMINED the illustration carved into the chamber wall. The artist had depicted a single large fish struggling to free itself from a fisherman's net. Its open mouth was the opening of a four-inch-wide hole in the wall. Mike and Doc could only guess what was inside. A precious treasure, or perhaps a trap?

"What do you think, Doc?" Mike asked. "Should I just reach inside and see if there's a coin in there?"

"I'd be willing to do it, but . . ." Doc held up his gloved hands with a slightly embarrassed look on his face. "I don't usually tell people this, Mike, because I'm afraid it would hurt my medical practice. I suffer from a rare form of neuropathy. I hate to admit it, but I'm losing the feeling in both my arms and my legs. It's the reason I use a cane and always wear these gloves."

"We just thought you were a germophobe," said Mike, trying to lighten the moment.

"I wish it were that simple."

Mike looked at the hole in the wall, feeling both nervous and excited at the same time. "If I do reach my hand in . . . well . . . what if a bat's holed up in there or something?"

"I suppose it's possible," Doc admitted.

Mike suddenly looked determined. "I'm overthinking it and psyching myself out. I've gotta just go for it."

Doc smiled at him warmly. "You remind me so much of your father."

"Thanks." Mike paused. "Wait, how could you have known my dad? You only came to town a couple of years ago."

"I should've said: What I've heard and read about him."

"Really?"

“Absolutely. Before he joined the Air Force, your dad earned quite the reputation as an amateur archaeologist. In fact, it was the story about him and his partner, Harry Lasiloo, in *National Geographic* magazine that prompted me to move to Ambrosia. You may not know this, but their exploits are legendary in certain circles. And they started out when they weren’t much older than you are now.”

“If we keep talking, Doc, I might lose my nerve.”

“Sorry, we don’t want that.”

Mike raised his right hand up to the hole. “Well, here goes.”

Mike closed his eyes and slowly reached inside until most of his forearm had disappeared. He stopped momentarily and looked at Doc Benson.

“Do you feel anything?” Doc asked.

“Not yet.” Beads of sweat appeared on Mike’s forehead. “I’ll reach in a little further.”

Mike took a deep breath and pushed his hand deeper into the hole, to the point that his elbow was no longer visible. Suddenly Mike’s eyes popped open in horror, and he was violently jerked forward.

“It’s got me, Doc!”

Mike slammed into the wall. His shoulder was the only thing keeping his arm from going in deeper.

Doc put his arms around the boy and pulled with all his might. “Hang on, Mike!”

While Doc pulled, Mike grimaced and pushed against the wall with his left arm. As he put all of his weight into it, his right arm slowly started backing out.

“C’mon, Mike! You can do it!” Doc urged.

It took tremendous effort, but Mike’s arm eventually pulled free. When his hand finally came into view, Mike saw that his wrist was looped in a tight leather snare. He grabbed the cord with both hands and yanked with all the strength he had left.

Something gave way, and they both heard a dull thud from somewhere over their heads. Dust fell from above, accompanied by the sound of creaking timbers. Ancient

mechanisms that remained dormant for half a millennium were triggered and slowly reawakened.

Across the room, a large stone block started protruding out of the wall. As the room rumbled and shook, the block continued to move forward until it fell away from its place in the wall and crashed to the floor. As quickly as they came to life, the ancient mechanisms ground to a halt.

In place of the stone block was now an empty square hole. Mike slipped his hand out of the snare and shined a flashlight into the opening. Inside he found a large gold coin balanced on a small wooden stand.

"Wow." Mike carefully removed the disc from its base and held it out for Doc to examine. "That's a big coin!"

The design featured a grinning skull wearing a feather headdress. The feathers emanated outward to the edges of the medallion.

"It's Aztec," Doc said, "and absolutely priceless!"

"Unfortunately, we have to pay the taxman," Mike reminded him.

"Yes, of course."

"I noticed something earlier." Mike turned his flashlight to the opposite wall, illuminating another etched illustration. It featured a man sitting at a table, an open scroll before him and moneybags on either side. His arm was outstretched, and above his hand was an open slot in the wall. "I'd say that's the taxman we're looking for."

"I believe you're right."

Mike held the large coin up to the slot in the wall. "And it looks like it will fit perfectly."

"Of course if this doesn't work, we'll have thrown away a small fortune," Doc said. He slowly shook his head. "Let me just enjoy it for a couple more moments."

Mike held the gold piece up for Doc to see. The gold glistened in his flashlight beam. The artistry on the face of the coin was absolutely flawless.

"Go ahead," Doc said reluctantly. "I sure hope this works."

Mike lifted the large coin up to the slot and let it slip in. Even after it disappeared, they could hear it bouncing down a

channel inside the wall.

Suddenly the noise stopped. Mike and Doc both held their breath, waiting for something—*anything*—to happen.

All was quiet.

“No . . .” Mike whispered.

“It’s gone.” Doc dropped his head in bitter disappointment. “We lost the coin for nothing.”

“I can’t believe it. We were so close!” Mike turned and, out of frustration, kicked the wall.

Mike’s kick must have jarred the coin loose, because they heard it once again begin to move. It bounced several more times down the channel before coming to a stop with a dull thud. The ancient mechanisms creaked back to life. The room shook for a second time, and more dust fell from above. The large stone that blocked their passage into the King’s Chamber slowly moved aside.

Mike and Doc stared into the dark expanse, both wondering what could possibly be inside.

Doc patted Mike on the shoulder. “I think you’ve earned the right to go in first, Mike.”

Shining a flashlight before him, Mike stepped through the door and was immediately impressed with the chamber’s size. It had to be as big as a basketball gymnasium. Large stone columns supported the ceiling above, and etchings on the floor drew the eye toward the center of the room, where a single pedestal stood.

Mike and Doc made their way to the middle of the chamber, where they noticed an ornate cast-iron chest atop the pedestal. A large clasp with a keyhole held the lid securely in place.

“We did it, Doc! We really found it!”

“The King’s Crown . . .” Doc’s eyes were wide with wonder. As he approached the chest, he reached into his pocket and pulled something out. Mike couldn’t tell what it was at first. He directed his flashlight beam toward Doc and couldn’t believe what his eyes were telling him.

Doc Benson was holding the stolen key of Coronado!

Chapter 19

EVERYONE AT THE LAST CHANCE DINER was trying to wrap their heads around what de Niza had just told them.

“I didn’t even know Jesus wore a crown,” Ben admitted. “Did you, Winnie?”

Winnie shrugged. Her family had raised her according to Navajo tradition, and that included their religious practices. She had visited Mike’s church once or twice and had a vague idea of Christ’s story from a movie she once saw. But that was the extent of her knowledge.

“I think He was called ‘King of the Jews,’ but I don’t remember anything about a crown,” she said.

“Maybe I can shed some light on it.” Pop sat down beside Winnie in the dining booth. “The only time Jesus was hailed as a king by a large group of people was when He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Unfortunately, that situation didn’t last long. Only a week later He was betrayed and crucified.”

As Winnie listened, she began sketching something in her notepad.

“It was all part of God’s plan,” Pop continued. “You see, the Bible tells us that all of us have sinned and fallen short of God’s perfect standard. And because of that, we all deserve eternal punishment. But God loves us so much that He sent His Son, Jesus, on the greatest rescue mission of all time. Luke 19:10 says that Jesus came to seek and save the lost, but to succeed at that mission He had to pay a price. He alone lived a perfect life—the sinless life we never could—so He alone was able to bear the punishment that we deserved.

“In that one instance, God treated Jesus as if He’d lived our sinful lives. And by suffering on the cross in our place, Jesus made all who trust in Him right with God.”

“So we can go to heaven,” Ben added.

“That’s right, Ben.” Pop looked at everyone around the table. “So, you ask what kind of crown Jesus had. The day He died, Christ wore *my* crown.”

“*Your* crown?” Ben asked.

“That’s right. The crown that I deserved.”

Ben scratched his head. “I still don’t get it.”

“Ben . . .” Winnie held up the sketch she had been working on.

The drawing depicted Christ hanging on the cross. His head was bent forward toward the viewer, His forehead encircled with intertwined branches full of sharp wooden barbs.

There was sadness in Winnie’s voice. “It’s a crown of thorns.”



At the center of the King’s Chamber, Doc approached the cast-iron chest, key in hand.

Mike was still trying to make sense of it all. “You’ve had Coronado’s key all along?”

“Think of it, Mike . . .” Doc ignored the question and inserted the key into the chest’s lock. “Inside this chest are riches beyond our wildest dreams!”

The sound of the chest’s clasp unlocking echoed throughout the chamber.

“But, Doc . . .”

Doc Benson slowly opened the chest and looked inside. An audible gasp escaped his lips and a look of shock spread across his face.

Mike’s view of what was inside was blocked by the chest’s lid.

“What is it, Doc? What’s inside?”

Doc began to laugh, softly at first, but as he reached inside the chest and carefully lifted out its contents, the laugh grew stronger and louder. Mike didn’t like what he was witnessing—or hearing. Doc’s laugh sounded like that of a crazy man. His eyes looked wild.

That's when Mike caught a glimpse of what Doc lifted from the chest. There was no gleam of gold. No shine of silver. No sparkle of priceless jewels. Instead, Doc held a twisted wreath of thorns.

Doc leaned back and laughed harder.

Now empty of its contents, the chest tipped forward off its pedestal, revealing a trigger mechanism that clicked into place. Doc's laugh caught in his throat as he realized what was happening. The pedestal was part of a trap, and he had just caused the first domino to fall.

A sound from somewhere over their heads caused Doc and Mike to look up. A stone counterweight began to descend, dislodging an enormous log from its resting place in the darkness above. Suspended by ropes, the wooden beam swung down from the ceiling in a low, pendulum-like arc across the room. As Mike watched helplessly, the huge log hit its mark at the base of one of the chamber's supportive pillars. The collision was thunderous. The stone column groaned, then tilted and fell toward Mike and Doc.

They had no time to run.

Chapter 20

SPENCE BURST INTO THE LAST CHANCE DINER, holding a large glossy photograph.

“Sheriff Smitty!” Spence ran up to the table. “Here’s a copy of the map.”

“Señor de Niza.” Smitty handed him the photo. “Here is a photo of the . . . um . . . map-o. Is that how you say it, Winnie?”

Winnie couldn’t help but laugh. “Close enough. It’s actually ‘mapa.’”

De Niza’s face lit up as he began studying the map.

“Look at him!” Pop Fowler smiled at the excited expression on de Niza’s face. “Like a kid in a candy shop. Can you imagine finally seeing something one of your forefathers created over 400 years ago?”

De Niza’s expression suddenly dropped as he seemed to notice something wrong within the photo. “¡No!” he exclaimed as he held up the photo for a closer look.

“What’s wrong with him?” Ben said.

“Is something wrong? Is it a fake?” Spence asked.

De Niza slid the photo toward Winnie and pointed at the upper left-hand corner. “¿Quién es el hombre en la foto?”

“He wants to know who the man in the photo is.”

“What man in the photo?” Ben asked.

De Niza’s finger tapped where he wanted them to look.

“I never noticed it before,” Winnie said, “but you can see Doc’s face reflected in the chrome table.”

“Tell him that’s only Doc Benson,” Smitty said. “The man who called him at the museum and told him about what we found.”

Winnie translated, then listened in shock to de Niza’s response.

"He says no one ever contacted the museum. He only found out about the key because of the newspaper article."

"But Doctor Benson said he called them," Spence said.

"He also says that he knows the man reflected in the photo," Winnie said. "He's actually a world-famous antiquities thief. And although he *is* a doctor, his name is *not* Benson."

"What?" Smitty sounded stunned.

"His name is *not* Benson!" Winnie reiterated.

The room fell into stunned silence.

"Oh, no!" Ben finally exclaimed. "Whoever Doc is, Mike is with him!"



Mike slowly opened his eyes, surprised to discover he was still alive. His whole body ached, especially his shoulder, but he was thankful that everything seemed intact. The last thing he remembered was the pillar coming down and having no time to run. He had a vague memory of tripping and falling, but after that—nothing. Mike guessed that he was knocked unconscious, but for how long he really had no idea.

The stone column's collapse also brought down part of the ceiling, as a beam of sunlight now shone down from a small hole above. Mike could see that dust was still settling in the chamber, so he must not have been unconscious for very long.

"Mike!" a voice groaned from somewhere close by.

"Doc?" Mike struggled to his feet, grabbed his flashlight, and trained its beam on the rubble around him.

"Over here," Doc called weakly.

As Mike moved toward the sound of Doc's voice, he realized how fortunate he was. Large rocks—some of them probably weighing well over a ton—were scattered all around.

"This way, Mike." Doc's voice was closer now.

Mike hoped that Doc might also emerge relatively unscathed, but such was not the case. He found Doc lying on his side. Both of his legs, from the knees down, were completely buried beneath a huge stone slab.

"Doc!"

"Help me," Doc pleaded. "Help me up."

“But your legs . . .”

Mike shined the flashlight at Doc’s legs, but Doc knocked the beam away.

“Don’t look down there!” he commanded.

“Okay, Doc. I won’t.”

“Listen to me very carefully, Mike. With your help, I can get out of this mess. Okay?”

“My shoulder’s hurt, but I’ll do my best.”

“I want you to get the rope out of my equipment bag.”

The equipment bag was already partially open. Mike quickly found the rope and pulled it out. He crouched next to Doc, not sure what to do next.

“Tie a length of the rope securely around your wrists and through your hands. Like this . . .” Doc helped Mike tie it into place. “Now give me the other end of the rope and stand right here.”

Mike moved into place. “I don’t see what this will accomplish. I can’t pull very hard because of my shoulder.”

“You’re gonna use your legs to help pull me out.”

“But the boulder landed on your . . .” Mike couldn’t bring himself to say it. “It’ll never work.”

“It *will* work!” Doc insisted. “Just do as I say!”

“Okay, I’ll try.”

“All right, now dig your feet in. Lean forward with your wrists between your feet and get ready to pull.”

Though he didn’t understand Doc’s plan, Mike leaned forward until his wrists were directly between his sneakers. He took a firm hold of the rope.

“Hold on a second.” Doc grabbed the rope tied around Mike’s wrists. “Let me just adjust this—”

In one quick move, Doc coiled the rope around Mike’s ankles and hands and knotted it securely.

Mike’s hands were now tied to his feet. He was helpless.

“Hey!” Mike pulled against the binds, but they only tightened. “What are you doing?”

“I told you before; I’m getting out of this mess.” Doc reached down to his crushed legs. He tore at the material around his knees.

Mike didn't want to watch. He couldn't stand the sight of blood. But as Doc continued to rip open his pant legs, Mike saw no trace of red. Instead, where there should have been flesh and blood, there was only plastic and metal.

Doc was wearing a set of high-tech prosthetic legs.

A spark flashed where the electronics within the legs had been crushed and were now short-circuiting.

Even more shocking, Mike could now see that Doc was wearing a small pair of boots that attached to the prosthetic legs just above the knee. Doc released the harness on each boot, stepping out of the braces and onto his own two extremely short legs.

"Surprised, Mike?" Doc removed his lab coat, revealing that he was wearing prosthetic arm extensions as well.

"Things are not always as they seem."

"But you . . . you're a . . ."

Doc put down the arm extensions and stood up straight. He was only three and a half feet tall.

"Achondroplasia is the technical term," he said. "It's more commonly known as dwarfism."

Without his prosthetics, Doc indeed displayed the classic characteristics of achondroplasia: a normal-sized head and torso, yet short limbs that had not grown since childhood.

"But why?" Mike asked.

"It's a genetic disorder. Yet perhaps more to your question is why I've put on this charade since I moved to town. Let's just say it's a bit complicated." Doc picked up the crown of thorns off the floor. "We're in luck! It hasn't been harmed."

Doc turned the tightly woven wreath of twisted thorns in his hands, studying it carefully. "It all makes sense now. The clues from Scripture, the elaborate lengths the Spaniards went to protect it—even giving their lives in selfless devotion before they would abandon such a treasure. This can only be the sacred crown of Christ! Perhaps not the precious gold and fabulous jewels I was expecting, but an artifact that is even more priceless!"

Mike struggled desperately against his binds. "Just let me go. Please!"

“I can’t do that, Mike.”

“But, Doctor Benson, you’ve been my friend!”

Doc paused and looked Mike in the eye. “As long as we’re being honest with each other, Benson isn’t my real name. And while your sentiment touches me deeply, I’m afraid you won’t consider me a friend much longer.”

Chapter 21

SHERIFF SMITTY, BEN, WINNIE, AND SPENCE stood under the awning of Buck Sweeney's Boat Rentals hut, waiting for Buck to finish up with a customer.

"What makes you think Mike and Doc came here?" Winnie asked.

"After what de Niza told us, we've got to assume that Doc is after the treasure," Smitty said. "Spence, even without your computer, do you think you can lead us to the right spot on the map?"

Spence nodded. "I can get us to the general area."

"Next!" called Buck Sweeney, and Smitty stepped up to the cash register. "How can I help you, Sheriff?"

"We'd like to rent a boat."

"Like I told the last customer, we're fresh out. The fish are really biting since the—"

"Never mind that. Did a Doctor Benson rent a boat from you earlier?"

Buck looked down at his rental registry. "As a matter of fact, he did. Boat number seventy-eight. Rented it to him and a boy a couple of hours ago."

"Do you even *have* seventy-eight boats?" Spence asked.

"No." Buck smiled sheepishly. "I just like the number."

"Look, Buck." Smitty pointed at the registry. "This is serious business. I've gotta find the two of them now! Don't you have *anything* that'll get us out on the lake?"

Buck's eyes narrowed as he thought it over.

"Maybe."



Smitty felt a little silly wearing a big orange life jacket and

sitting behind Ben on a Jet Ski.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing, Ben?” Smitty asked as he began untying the Jet Ski from the dock.

“Sure!” Ben grinned and gave him a thumbs-up.

Spence and Winnie sat in a canoe tied to the back of the Jet Ski.

“Don’t go too fast,” Winnie called. “This thing might tip over.”

“I won’t.” Ben leaned forward, examining the controls. “If I could only figure out how to get this thing started . . .”

Smitty looked concerned. “I thought you’d driven one of these before!”

The Jet Ski fired to life with a roar.

“Don’t worry!” Ben shouted over the noise of the engine. “I heard it’s just like driving a quad runner—except on water!”

“No!” Smitty shouted in alarm. “It’s *nothing at all* like a quad—”

Smitty held tightly to Ben as the Jet Ski accelerated away from the pier.



Mike watched helplessly as the man he had known as Doctor Benson lit a candle.

“I guess an introduction is in order. Doctor Milo Bellamy is my real name.” Bellamy set the candle on a stone next to a rope rigging.

“What are you doing?” Mike asked.

“Covering my tracks, Mike.” Bellamy gently placed the crown of thorns back into the cast-iron chest. “If I’ve calculated correctly, the candle should burn down to the rope in approximately ten minutes. Once the rope burns through, it’ll trigger another one of the Spaniards’ ingenious traps and bring the entire roof of this chamber down. If anyone comes looking for us, as I’m sure they will, they’ll assume we both died in the cave-in.”

“I don’t think so. Somebody like Smitty will figure it out.”

“On the contrary, I’ve gotten away with this sort of thing

before. Nobody suspects a thing.” Bellamy tucked the ornate chest under one arm and threw the equipment bag over his shoulder. “Good-bye, Mike.”

“Hold on! You can’t just steal the crown. Think of its spiritual significance!”

Bellamy paused and smiled. “It’s moments like this that you remind me so much of your dad.”

“Then you *did* know him!”

“Know him? Why do you think I’ve spent so much time in Ambrosia? It’s certainly not for the weather.”

The answer might have been obvious to Bellamy, but not to Mike. “I . . . I don’t understand,” he said.

“Think about it, Mike. This town is so small, yet so many mysteries all take place right here. Have you ever wondered why, or did you think it was all just coincidence?” Doctor Bellamy glanced at the burning candle and then at his watch. “Out of time, Mike. Time for me to run along.”

Without another word, Bellamy turned and trudged off with his precious cargo.

“Wait!” Mike pleaded. “How do you know my father?”

Bellamy continued forward, never looking back.

“Please!” Mike yelled.

“If it makes you feel any better, I can tell you one thing about your father . . .” Bellamy’s voice echoed from far away.

“ . . . he’s not dead.”

Chapter 22

OTHER THAN BARELY MISSING A BUOY, Ben did a surprisingly decent job towing the canoe across Apache Lake without losing any of his passengers.

"I'm pretty good at this, huh?" Ben yelled, looking back at his friends.

"Just keep your eyes on what's ahead!" Smitty replied.

"Spence, how are we doing?"

Spence sat in the front of the canoe, studying the map. "I think we should take a left at the next inlet."

Smitty tapped Ben on the shoulder. "Hear that, Ben?"

"Yeah, but *what* inlet?"

Smitty pointed ahead to where an outboard motorboat had just emerged. "Right where that boat just pulled out."

The boat sped by going in the opposite direction.

"That was boat number seventy-eight!" Winnie yelled. "It was Doc!"

Smitty strained to see for himself. "Was Mike with him?"

"No! He was all by himself!"

"Okay, there's no time to waste." Smitty reached around to untie the canoe from the back of the Jet Ski. "We can't catch him towing the canoe, so here's where we split up. I want you two to search that inlet to see if you can find Mike."

"Will do!" Spence called out.

Smitty tapped Ben on the shoulder and pointed toward the motorboat. "Let's go, Ben! He's getting away!"



Within the King's Chamber, Mike struggled to free himself. A few yards away the candle had already melted down to the level of the rope, and the flame was beginning to burn

through.

Mike knew he had very little time. Even worse, it seemed that the more he struggled, the more the cords around his wrists and feet tightened. The circulation to his hands was nearly cut off, and they were beginning to grow numb.

Though the situation seemed hopeless, Mike tried not to panic.

“Dear God,” he prayed aloud. “I don’t know what to do. Please help me!”

Mike wondered if he could somehow sever the cords. He tried rubbing them back and forth against a rock, but quickly realized that the edge was not nearly sharp enough and that the process was taking way too much time.

It was then that he remembered Spence’s latest invention. Hidden in the heel of Mike’s sneaker was a small compartment. Since Mike’s hands were tied to his ankles, he thought he might be able to reach it. Mike’s fingers were nearly numb by now, but he felt around the side of his sneaker and found the small latch Spence had installed. Mike opened the latch and shook his foot back and forth. A round one-inch orb fell out of the compartment and onto the ground.

Spence told him that the orb contained two small chambers, each containing a different chemical. To mix the compounds together, all he had to do was break the container and get out of the way.

Mike closed his eyes and smashed his foot down on the orb as hard as he could. There was a brief flash, followed by the hissing sound of a chemical reaction. A thick cloud of bright red smoke rose up into the air and toward the hole in the ceiling.

He prayed it would be enough to get someone’s attention.

Chapter 23

NOW FREE OF THE CANOE, Ben was able to get the Jet Ski running well over fifty miles an hour. Even with Smitty's added weight on the back, they started gaining on Doc's boat.

Smitty pointed ahead. "He's headed back to the rental pier!"

"He's trying to get away!" Ben yelled over the sound of the motor.

"Don't worry. I've got a surprise waiting for him."

"What kind of surprise?"

"On the way here, I had Arlene call in the state troopers for backup."



Nearing the pier, Doctor Bellamy caught sight of two police vehicles in the parking lot. Their lights were flashing, and several state troopers stood around his parked Range Rover. Doc groaned in frustration and made a sharp, ninety-degree turn. As he turned, Doc saw for the first time that he was being trailed by Ben and Sheriff Smitty on a Jet Ski.

"They think they've got me boxed in." Bellamy shook his head and smiled. "Well, come and get me, boys. See what happens!"



"Look!" Spence pointed to a column of red smoke rising nearby. "That's gotta be Mike's new shoe beacon!"

Spence steered the canoe onto the beach, and Winnie immediately climbed out.

"Mike!" she called. "Wait . . . Spence, I see tracks in the sand!"

Spence pointed to where the tracks led: an opening in the rock wall. "He's gotta be in there!"

"Hang on, Mike!" Winnie shouted. "We're coming!"



Within the King's Chamber, Mike could make out the sound of distant voices.

"In here!" he called. Mike glanced at the candle and his heart sank. The rope was now on fire and beginning to fray apart.

"Hurry!" he yelled. "Please hurry!"



At the helm of the outboard boat, Doctor Bellamy tried to outrun the Jet Ski right on his tail. Yet the single-engine craft he'd rented was meant for fishing and waterskiing, not setting speed records. Even with the boat's throttle all the way forward, the Jet Ski was again gaining on him.

Bellamy realized there was no way he could outrun the Jet Ski. But perhaps there was another way to get rid of his pursuers. With the throttle locked in the forward position, Bellamy lifted his hands off the wheel to see how the boat would respond.

Apache Lake was smooth as glass that day. The boat never wavered from its course.

Bellamy unzipped his equipment bag and pulled out the cast-iron chest containing the crown. He stashed the chest next to the captain's chair and reached back into his bag. This time he pulled out several sticks of dynamite and a lighter.



"Are we sure that's Doc?" Ben asked. "It's hard to see from here, but it looks more like a little kid is steering that thing."

"That's boat number seventy-eight," Smitty said, pointing to the large number painted on the tail of the boat. "And why else would he have turned away after seeing the state police?"

"I don't know." Ben pointed ahead. "But look! He just

threw something.”

Ben swerved the Jet Ski to the right to avoid being hit. The water to their left suddenly erupted, sending a water spout high into the air.

“Waaah!” Ben screamed.

“That’s him all right.” Smitty looked mad now. “Don’t slow down, Ben!”

Another water spout erupted, this time to their right.

“Yeeeah!” Ben was terrified.

“That does it.” Smitty looked more determined than ever. “When we catch that guy, I’m gonna really pepper his hash!”

Ben caught a brief glimpse of another red stick landing directly in their path. But this time he had no chance to swerve. Fortunately, the dynamite sank several feet underwater before going off. Unfortunately, it detonated directly beneath the front of the craft. The explosion almost knocked Ben and Smitty into the water. The fiberglass engine cover blew high into the air.



Winnie and Spence knew immediately that something was wrong. Not only was Mike tied up, but his eyes were wide with fear.

“The rope!” Mike yelled. “Somebody grab it!”

The burning rope had frayed down to a single strand. Spence grabbed it seconds before it snapped and triggered its deadly trap.

Mike let out a sigh of relief. “Whatever you do, Spence, don’t let go of that rope!”

“What does it do?” Winnie asked. “Ring a bell or something?”

“No, it doesn’t ring a bell!”

“I was *kidding*!” she insisted.

“Would somebody just untie me?”

Chapter 24

THOUGH A LARGE SECTION of the engine cover was gone, the Jet Ski was somehow still running—though not very well. The engine began to cough and sputter.

Ben had learned his lesson. He was no longer driving the craft directly behind the boat, where they were an easy target. He was now steering the Jet Ski slightly off to the side, so they could keep a wary eye on Doc and anything else he might decide to toss their way.

“I think he’s out of explosives anyway,” Smitty called from his seat behind Ben. “Try to move in closer!”

The Jet Ski coughed again and let out a loud backfire. Smoke began pouring out from the engine compartment.

“Something’s wrong, and it’s getting worse,” Ben said. “I don’t know how much longer I can keep up this speed.”

“I only need a few more seconds.” Smitty held a coiled rope in his hand. “Try to get as close to the outboard motor as you can. I’m gonna try something.”

“Where’d you get the rope?”

“You drove off before I was able to untie us from the dock. We tore off the cleat and everything! Now get a little closer!”

Ben glanced over his shoulder and saw Smitty crouched on the back of the Jet Ski. He had a length of rope in his hand and was twirling a lasso over his head like a steer roper at a rodeo.

“C’mon, Ben!” Smitty yelled. “Get right in there—close!”

Ben steered the Jet Ski as close as he dared. The motor sputtered and the craft began to fall away from Doc’s boat. Ben knew they wouldn’t get another chance. Smitty’s lasso sailed through the air and hit its mark.

“Gotcha!” Smitty pulled the rope taut, cinching the lasso tightly around the vessel’s outboard motor.



Back at the wheel, Doc Bellamy immediately felt the drag of the Jet Ski he was now pulling. He knew Smitty was a lot smarter than some people gave him credit for, but he had no idea the sheriff could be so doggedly determined.

Bellamy steered the boat into extremely sharp turns. First hard right, then hard left. The Jet Ski whipped around behind the boat like a pendulum, with Ben and Smitty barely holding on.



Winnie and Spence stumbled out of the cavern and breathed a sigh of relief, but Mike wasn't wasting any time. He sprinted toward the beached canoe.

"Where are you going?" Winnie yelled.

"After the crown!" Mike pushed the canoe into the water and hopped in. "We can't let him get away!"

"You'll never catch him in that," Spence said.

Mike paddled away. "I've gotta try!"

"Don't worry about us!" Winnie called after him. "We only saved your life. You can come back and thank us later!"



Doc Bellamy was running out of patience. No matter how hard he turned the motorboat, he couldn't shake the sheriff and the kid. Bellamy had steered in so many circles and so many different directions that he was now a bit disoriented. Dizzy, even. He was no longer sure of his exact position in the lake.

It's time to end this thing, he thought.

Bellamy put the throttle into neutral and the boat immediately slowed. He opened a compartment, pulled out the emergency flare gun, and moved to the back of the boat.

Ben and Sheriff Smitty looked even more disoriented than Bellamy felt. Simply hanging on to their watercraft had been quite a struggle. Smitty raised his gun with a wobbly arm.

“Freeze! You’re under arre—!” Smitty paused mid-sentence. He blinked several times. “Doc? Is that you? How did you get so . . .”

“Small?” Bellamy raised the flare gun. “Right now I think you’ve got much more to be concerned about than my height.”

“He’s got a gun!” Ben raised his hands into the air.

Smitty was unimpressed. “Lower your hands, Ben. That’s only a flare pistol.”

“Still very lethal,” Bellamy warned.

Ben’s hands shot back up.

“Not hardly.” Smitty looked unfazed. “Even if you *did* hit one of us, the worst that could happen is it’d leave a bad burn before bouncing off into the water.”

“But that’s exactly the point, Sheriff. Have you bothered to look around you?”

The water all around the Jet Ski glistened with gasoline that had leaked from its wounded engine.

“I don’t even need to be accurate to ignite the pool of gas you’re floating in,” Bellamy said. “You don’t want to die that way, do you?”

“No . . .” Ben’s voice croaked. “I don’t want to die *any* way!”

“Good boy. Now toss your gun away, Smitty.”

Smitty lowered his gun. “Into the lake?”

“Yes.”



Ben was pretty sure that they were both doomed. That’s when something caught his eye.

Behind Bellamy, a canoe glided toward the bow of the motorboat. Two hands appeared on the side rails and a figure pulled itself up. It was Mike!

Ben nudged Smitty, who now saw him as well.

“*Stall*,” Smitty whispered so only Ben could hear.

Ben forced an awkward laugh. “Heh, heh. So . . . is that a trout I see down there?”

Bellamy wasn’t buying it. “Smitty—toss the gun!”

Smitty gazed at his revolver sadly. "Do you have any idea how much a Colt Python .357 is worth?"

"I really don't care," Bellamy sneered.

Behind Bellamy, Mike quietly lowered himself onto the motorboat's deck.

"My folks bought this pistol for me when I graduated from the academy," Smitty explained.

"Quit stalling!" Bellamy snapped. "Toss the gun away. Now!"

Smitty reluctantly did as he was told. "So it was *you* we saw on the security cam footage."

"You think?" Bellamy reached for the lasso looped around the outboard motor.

Directly behind him, Mike crept toward a cast-iron chest resting near the captain's chair. The boat's idling motor helped cover the sound of his movements.

Ben watched as Mike moved slowly across the deck. Bellamy was still wrestling with the rope around the outboard motor, but he glanced up to see Ben's eyes trained on something behind him. He spun around just as Mike picked up the chest.

"Mike! How did you—?" Bellamy raised the flare gun. "Put the chest back down. *Now.*"



Mike slowly lowered the chest back down to the deck. His mind raced as he desperately tried to come up with a plan. His eyes fell on the throttle.

"Hey, Doc!" Smitty suddenly yelled.

As Bellamy turned toward the sheriff, Mike lunged for the throttle.

Everything happened at once: The engine roared to life. The boat leaped forward. The chest slid away from Mike, across the deck, and hit hard against the stern of the boat.

Bellamy lost his balance and the flare gun went off. The flare barely missed Mike, lodged under the front console, and burst into flames. Smitty and Ben struggled to hang on as the Jet Ski was, once again, yanked headlong after the boat.

The motorboat sped across the lake, quickly ramping up to full speed.

Mike dove for the chest and landed hard on his already aching shoulder. The pain was *excruciating*. He pushed past the agony and grabbed the chest tightly.

Bellamy regained his balance and was on Mike in an instant. The two wrestled for control of the chest, tumbling back and forth across the deck. Though Bellamy was smaller, the stabbing pain in Mike's shoulder definitely put him at a disadvantage.

Meanwhile, the fire near the front of the boat was growing. The flames were spreading around the captain's chair and front console. Smoke poured into the sky.



Smitty could see that the situation in the motorboat was desperate. He grabbed hold of the rope and tried to pull the Jet Ski closer.

"Hang on, Mike!" he yelled.

"Sheriff Smitty!" Ben pointed into the distance. "There's something up ahead, and it's not good!"

Smitty saw it too. "Mike!" he yelled as loud as he could. "Look out!"



Mike, however, was rather occupied. He rolled away with the chest and tried to get to his feet, but Bellamy tackled him, and Mike fell backward. Mike's shoulder once again exploded in pain.

The two were face-to-face as they fought for control of the chest. Bellamy could see the anguish in Mike's expression.

"You're hurt, Mike," he growled. "It's your shoulder, isn't it?"

Bellamy pushed a corner of the chest into Mike's shoulder. Mike cried out in agony.

Mike could hear Ben and Smitty yelling something about danger ahead, but at that moment he didn't care. The pain in

his shoulder was too intense. He was beginning to see stars and realized he was about to pass out. If only he could fall into the water and take the chest with him. It was his only chance.

Smitty yelled, "Get out of there *now*, Mike!"

Utterly exhausted, Mike leaned back and let himself fall overboard. He held onto the chest as tightly as he could.

It wasn't tightly enough. When Mike hit the water, Doc Bellamy still had the chest in his hands. He raised it high above his head and shouted victoriously.



Bellamy never recognized the danger until he noticed the boat pass a line of brightly colored warning buoys. He spun around to see that the boat was headed directly toward the dam's spillway. He barely had time to scream.

The burning boat was running full throttle when it shot over the spillway. Like a fiery comet, it arced gracefully through the air before beginning its 200-foot plummet into the canyon below.

Chapter 25

THE NEXT MORNING, the four Last Chance Detectives watched from a nearby hillside as state troopers scoured the canyon and river below for the remains of Dr. Milo Bellamy. Mike's arm was in a sling. The pain in his shoulder had already subsided quite a bit, but he was still feeling low.

"Here comes Pop," he said. "Maybe he can tell us something more."

The hike out of the canyon was fairly steep, and Pop Fowler had worked up quite a sweat by the time he reached the top. He pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket and wiped his forehead as he approached the kids.

"They found more wreckage," he said, "but absolutely no trace of Bellamy. Or the crown."

"You don't think he got away, do you?" Ben asked.

"I don't see how anyone could've survived that," Pop said. "But I guess it's not out of the realm of possibility."

"I hope he *did* survive," Mike said flatly.

"How can you say that?" Ben exclaimed. "He tried to murder you, he threatened to kill me and Smitty, *and* he stole the crown!"

"I just want to talk to him. Ask him a few questions. He seemed to know things."

"What kind of things?" Winnie asked.

Mike wasn't sure what to tell them. He paused and looked down. "He told me that . . . that . . . my dad is still alive."

Ben and Winnie gasped.

"How could he know that?" Spence asked.

"I don't know. But the way he talked . . ." Mike was still trying to figure it all out. "It's like he's been pulling strings from behind the scenes for a very long time."

"I wouldn't put much faith into anything he told you," Pop

said. "For the two years that we've known him, everything about Doc has been a lie. From his real name to his actual height. He's done nothing but deceive us from the very beginning."

"Maybe he was just trying to get into your head, Mike," Winnie suggested.

"Maybe . . ."

The four kids looked thoughtfully toward the canyon below.

"Hey, what's with the long faces?" Pop asked. "You kids did great and have a lot to be proud of!"

"That's right," Winnie said. "Isn't this the part where we're supposed to congratulate each other on solving another case?"

"But it doesn't really feel like we did," Mike replied.

Winnie rolled her eyes. "What are you talking about? Think of the discoveries we've made. Finding the conquistador under the waterfall. Coronado's key. The map to the Chamber of the King's Crown!"

"Yeah, but we lost the crown," Mike said.

"I know," Ben agreed. "We finally had real evidence that Christ existed."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Pop said. "Ancient historians like Josephus, who lived just after the time of Christ, have already affirmed the fact that a man named Jesus, who claimed to be the Son of God, actually existed. Even Jesus' crucifixion on the cross is an accepted part of the historical record. It's *who* you think He was—and *is*—that really matters."

Smitty's truck pulled up next to the group, and the sheriff climbed out of the cab. He was holding the cast-iron chest in his hands.

"You found the crown!" Winnie cried.

"Hate to disappoint you." Smitty opened the lid.

The chest was empty.

"It's gone!" Ben exclaimed. "The crown of Christ is gone!"

"If it really was the true crown of Christ," Spence said. "I did some research last night, and it turns out that there is at least one other crown of thorns that people claim is the real

deal. It's kept at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris."

"Well, I've gotta get back down there," Smitty said. "You all might as well take off. It's getting close to noon, and you're probably getting hungry. I'll let you know if there are any new developments."

"Thanks, Smitty." Pop waved as Smitty climbed back into his truck. "C'mon, kids. Let's go home."

Mike momentarily lingered behind.

"What's the matter, Mike?" Ben asked. "Something still bothering you?"

"I'm not sure what it is," Mike said, "but something tells me we haven't seen the last of Doctor Milo Bellamy."

About the Author

ROBERT VERNON is the creator of The Last Chance Detectives. He produced the video series, wrote the screenplays, and directed *Legend of the Desert Bigfoot*. He also wrote and directed The Last Chance Detectives radio drama, *Last Flight of the Dragon Lady*.

Robert got his start in the entertainment industry working for television legends Johnny Carson and Dick Clark. He was a founding member of Focus on the Family's film department, where he wrote, produced, and directed many of the Adventures in Odyssey video episodes.

In 2001 he wrote and directed the feature film *Road to Redemption* for Billy Graham's World Wide Pictures. As an editor, Robert has worked on hundreds of network and cable television episodes.

Robert lives with his wife, Kristen, in Santa Clarita, California. They have three sons, one grandson, and a dog named Chance.



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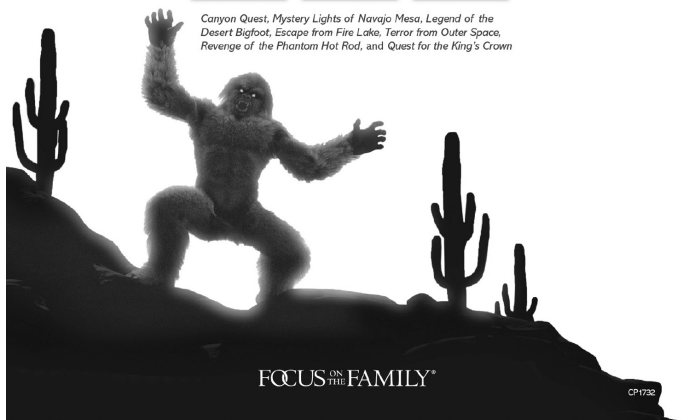
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